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Author's Note

[image]

DEVIOUS FATES

SUN IN THE SHADOW

DEVIOUS FATES

A WARRIOR CATS FANFICTION

ERIN HUNTER'S TEAM OF WRITERS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR CREATING "Warrior Cats", AND NOT BY ANY MEANS AM I CLAIMING IT AS MY OWN. THIS STORY HAS A DIFFERENT STORYLINE AND DIFFERENT CHARACTERS, BUT IS HIGHLY INFLUENCED BY ERIN HUNTER'S WRITING AND TRADITIONS THAT HAVE BEEN SET.

"A great hero has been born.. but it comes with a great toll.

A great villain has also been born."

STORY WRITTEN BY

Wetstar_Animations

STORYLINE AND CHARACTERS IN ASSOCIATION WITH:

DARK DIENO, THISTLE_THORN, SPOTTEDSTAR, SILVERSTAR, AND DAWNSHADOW

// Allegiances

[image] [image][image] [image]

ALLEGIANCES

Provided By Thistle_Thorn

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER

WHITESTAR- snow white tom with black spots on his back and a black tail and water blue eyes

DEPUTY

PINEWHISKER-dusky brown tom with water blue eyes
APPRENTICE, THRUSHPAW

MEDICINE CAT

MOSSPELT-silver tabby she-cat
APPRENTICE, PIGEONPAW

WARRIORS **(toms and she-cats without kits)**

EAGLEFEATHER-muscular spotted black and brown tom with one blue and one yellow eye
APPRENTICE, RACCOONPAW

DUSTAIL-light brown she-cat
APPRENTICE, LEOPARDPAW

GREYWING-scarred light grey she-cat

RABBITEAR-small black

she-cat with unusually large ears
APPRENTICE, DUSKPAW

SQUIRRELCHASE-small dark ginger tom
APPRENTICE, THISTLEPAW

RAGGEDJAW-unkempt black tom with a broken jaw

MOUSEFANG-small black tom with a small muzzle and yellow eyes

TREEFLIGHT-dark brown she-cat with dark brown eyes

ROBINFEATHER-sleek ginger and black tom
APPRENTICE, SPLASHPAW

WEEDTAIL-brown and white tom

APPRENTICES (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

SPLASHPAW-ginger, white and black she cat

THRUSHPAW-big red-brown tom with amber eyes

LEAPORDPAW-unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat

DUSKPAW-big pale grey (with darker flecks) tom, water blue eyes

RACCOONPAW-muscular striped grey tom with golden eyes

THISTLEPAW-muscular black and brown tom with bright amber eyes

PIGEONPAW-fuzzy grey tom

QUEENS **(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)**

HONEYLEAF-pale tabby she-cat, mother of Robinfeather's kits: Maplekit (pale tom) and Shadekit (black tom)

JUNIPERFLOWER-blue-grey she-cat, mother of Raggedjaw's kits: Bluekit (blue-grey she-kit), Rainkit (blue-grey she-kit), Stormkit (big grey tabby tom) and Smokekit (black tom)

GOLDENHEART-golden tabby she-cat, mother of Eaglefeather's kits: Moonkit (small grey and white she-kit) and Shimmerkit (brown and black spotted she-kit), and Brinekit (grey, deaf and blind tom)

ELDERS **(former warriors and queens, now retired)**

SPARROWFEATHER-deaf black and brown tom

FOUNTAINFUR-light blue-grey she-cat with yellow eyes

HEAVYCLOUD-big black tom with light grey paws

BADGEREYE-black she-cat with a white stripe

WINDCLAN

LEADER

VINESTAR-big brown and white tabby tom with brown stripes and

green eyes

DEPUTY

JAYHEART-grey tom with amber eyes

MEDICINE CAT

WILLOWHEART-silver tabby she-cat with yellow eyes
APPRENTICE, BROKENPAW

WARRIORS **(toms and she-cats without kits)**

AMBERSTRIPE- brown and black she-cat with a ginger stripe going down her back and amber eyes

LITTLEFOOT-small grey tom with yellow eyes
APPRENTICE, BUZZARDPAW

FIERCETALON-skinny black and brown tom with yellow eyes
APPRENTICE, EMBERPAW

LIONRAGE-muscular ginger tom with amber eyes
APPRENTICE, GINGERPAW

FLAKEPELT-white tom with blue eyes

TIGERTAIL-big brown tabby tom with green eyes (formerly SkyClan)
APPRENTICE, MOLEPAW

CLOVERPATCH-brown she-cat with green eyes

COPPERFROST-ginger and brown she-cat with ice blue eyes
APPRENTICE, CINNAMONPAW

TANSYBRANCH-brown

and white tabby she-cat
APPRENTICE, TALLPAW

WEBSHINE-silver tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

SPOTTEDPELT-small golden she-cat with black spots and green eyes

APPRENTICES (more than 6 moons old, in training to become warriors)

GINGERPAW-ginger she-cat with blue eyes

CINNAMONPAW-ginger-brown tom with copper eyes

MOLEPAW-big brown tom with yellow-green eyes

TALLPAW-tall brown and white tom with amber eyes

BROKENPAW-white she-cat with a broken hind leg

BUZZARDPAW-grey tabby tom with black stripes

EMBERPAW-ginger and black she-cat with orange eyes

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

SORRELPATH-big black, white and orange tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes, expecting kits

DARKPOOL-dark blue-grey she-cat, expecting kits

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now

retired)

TWOCLAW-brown and grey tabby tom with two claws left, oldest cat in WindClan

BEAVERTAIL-Sturdy brown tom with a flat tail, retired early due to failed hearing

RIVERCLAN

LEADER

LIGHTSTAR- light brown and white tabby tom with ginger stripes and ice blue eyes

DEPUTY

CREEKMIST-big grey-brown tom with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT

MINNOWPOOL- black tom with gold eyes

WARRIORS **(toms and she-cats without kits)**

THUNDERFOOT-big black tom with white paws

SPIDERDAWN-grey tom with yellow eyes
APPRENTICE, SPIKEPAW

LILYPOND-brown and white she-cat

SPARKCLOUD-black tom with red speckles

TROUTSTREAM-blue-grey tom with a torn ear

POPPYWISH-white and

ginger tabby she-cat, formerly SkyClan
APPRENTICE, SAGEPAW

SNAKESTRIKE-pale tabby tom with a long tail

STARLINGFLAME-brown tom
APPRENTICE, SHARKPAW

SNEEZEFROST-white tom with ice blue eyes

RIPPLECREEK-dark tabby tom with a scarred muzzle, formerly SkyClan

FOXFANG-ginger tom

SHARPCLAW- grey tom with light gray speckles

APPRENTICES (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

SHARKPAW- black and white she-cat, mother former member of SkyClan

SAGEPAW-brown and ginger tortoiseshell she-cat

SPIKEPAW-fluffy grey she-cat with amber eyes

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

SMALLPELT -dark grey she-cat, mother of Sneezefrost's kits:
Weedkit (pale tom) and Snowkit (white she-cat) Wetkit (grey she-kit)

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

RUBBLECLOUD-dark grey tom, formerly SkyClan

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

LAKESTAR-dark grey and brown tom with green eyes

DEPUTY

TANGLEFROST-brown and white tabby she-cat

MEDICINE CAT

EAGLECLOUD-grey and black tom

WARRIORS **(toms and she-cats without kits)**

VOLEFOOT-grey tom with yellow eyes
APPRENTICE, SILVERPAW

THORNBRANCH-grey and brown tabby tom
APPRENTICE, HAZELPAW

ROSEFERN-tortoiseshell she-cat

TOADPUDDLE-mud-brown tom

SOOTBREEZE-pale tabby tom with grey speckles

WOLFSPIRIT-black tabby tom
APPRENTICE, DAWNPAW

SLEEKFUR-slender grey-blue tom with unusually sleek fur

APPRENTICE, DUSKPAW

WEASELFACE-brown tabby tom
APPRENTICE, OWLPAW

SUNFLOWER-pale ginger she-cat with white speckles
APPRENTICE, PRICKLEPAW

APPRENTICES **(more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)**

OWLPAW-brown and grey she-cat with amber eyes

PRICKLEPAW-brown tabby tom with black stripes

HAZELPAW-tortoiseshell tom with green eyes

YARROWPAW-yellow faded ginger she-cat with amber eyes

SILVERPAW-silver tabby tom with blue eyes

DUSKPAW-dusty tom with dark brown speckles

DAWNPAW-grey she-cat with orange eyes

ELDERS **(former warriors and queens, now retired)**

WASPTAIL-blue-grey tabby she-cat with a small tail

SNAILFACE-blind pale tom

// Prologue

Pine trees swayed left and right at the grip of the pulsing breeze which chilled them to their roots. It was not a gentle night, proven by the howling wind that disturbed the sleep of many creatures seeking shelter in the dark glade; which was unusual during the evenings of greenleaf. The moon, which normally shed light onto the pine forest's darkness during even the most uneasy nights, was obscured by clouds, as if accepting the grim truth of trouble that sat below the sky. A terrified she-cat hurled out of the shadowed thickets, practically tripping over herself from being set clumsy by the fear inside her.

The she-cat's pupils were shrunken in terror, her orange pelt lifted around her neck and along her spine. Her ears started to fall closer onto her skull as she warily slunk closer towards the riverbank, a small shape whimpering in her jaws. The ash, light and dark grey shape writhed around, squealing and straining to escape from the apricot feline's hold.

The golden she-cat lowered her head, carefully setting the figure on a nest of bracken. As her anxious yellow eyes stayed fixed on the newborn kit, she looked as if deadly futures were amplifying inside of her mind. She was stiff to the ground, struggling to resist the urge to screech her misery to the stars. Unusually, the kit started to slightly relax, listening to the tune of water gushing against the rocks, oblivious to the orange feline's worry.

The she-cat's tail quivered uneasily and even impatiently. She buried her face in the kit's fur, grateful for its tranquility that she wished would spread onto her. The wind continued to howl menacingly as the full moon hung high in the sky, turning scarlet red behind the clouds as dawn approached. Dew sprouted on reeds around the river, filling the air with lush, watery scents.

An abrupt rustle of bushes set the tangerine she-cat to crane her head to the side. She fearfully gazed across the brook, her ears swiveling here and there. A moon-like tom with sleek fur appeared

on the opposing side. Grey spots were dispersed all over his body. His fur bristled defensively and he set an intimidating paw forward.

As the tom was about to interrogate the trespasser, his hostile expression suddenly softened. "G-Goldenheart?" he gasped, his voice stuttering with bewilderment. His tail slightly lifted, floating in the air before he sent a glance to the ground, embarrassed.

"I thought you'd be expecting me," Goldenheart mewed, narrowing her eyes. She sat up from the undergrowth, shaking off pine straw and pine needles that were snagging to her pelt. She stepped beside the thick pelt of the kit.

"I.." the tom started, gulping. His gaze flashed with realization as he noticed the kit that comfortably rested in the bracken. "Is that..?"

"Yes," Goldenheart sighed. Her optics gleamed with admiration for the tom, but the rest of her face signaled tension and uneasiness. "It's Moonkit."

"What about Shimmerkit?" the tom asked, concerned. He padded closer to the bank. Love sparkled in his eyes as he measured the resemblance in the she-kit's markings. She was light grey, with a few darker stripes and the white chest of her mother.

"I think ShadowClan can defend her.. I-I didn't have time to get her." The tom's ear twitched at her response, and he nervously kneaded his paws in the undergrowth across the river. "Sharpclaw," Goldenheart addressed, her tone earnest. "You must take Moonkit to RiverClan."

"I.." Sharpclaw choked. He sucked in a large breath.

"I *need* you to. *She* needs you to," Goldenheart reaffirmed, lifting her chin. She glimpsed back at Moonkit, who's head rested on her tired paw before lifting, her nose twitching curiously as it took in large whiffs of the moist scent. "You know what Vinestar threatened." Goldenheart's eyes darkened in dread, and desperation pulsed from her in violent waves. "H-he'll attack, at dawn.." the golden she-cat whisked her head up to gaze at the sky. To her, it looked like the horizon would drape strands of vines to strangle her. "Bringing

Moonkit to RiverClan will help us all."

"We can't keep having these meetings, Goldenheart," Sharpclaw puffed after a few heartbeats, almost dismissing Goldenheart's prior statement. Anger burned in Goldenheart's throat at his response. "We'll be caught! If Whitestar and Lightstar figure out about our meetings.." he paused as situations flashed through his mind. "Only StarClan knows what they'll do to us!"

Goldenheart tried to calm herself, but it didn't work. She shook her head. "We are taking a risk," she meowed, fixing her gaze boldly on the grey figure. "But I request you to do this for me." Goldenheart beckoned Moonkit ahead with a nudge. The grey she-kit stumbled, almost tripping into the hungry brook.

Sharpclaw shot a helpless glance to the scrap of fur, before hastily glimpsing away. "I.." he gulped. Goldenheart held her breath. "We have to stop, Goldenheart," he meowed firmly, straightening his posture.

Goldenheart's pupils grew huge. A lump formed in her throat as past memories jolted through her mind. Feelings of betrayal had been tugging at her heart in a mix of fury. A dark grey figure gave her a bitter expression, its amber eyes glowing in vengeful wrath. A brown and black she-cat caressed her tongue across the dark figure and separated her jaws in a vicious hiss, her tail protectively layed on the dark grey figure's back. She unsheathed her claws into the ground, baring her teeth.

"You're just like Jayheart," Goldenheart retorted, shuttering. "Aren't you?"

Sharpclaw's eyes flashed in fear. "No!" he protested with frantic, his jaws staying agaped with shock.

"Aren't you?" Goldenheart repeated dryly. She thirsted for an answer, staring deeply into Sharpclaw's gaze; which stood unreadable as his head cocked to the side fearfully as he shut his eyes in a small prayer to StarClan. It was what Sharpclaw deserved, wasn't it? He had abandoned the warrior code.

"We'll always be together!" Sharpclaw begged after contemplating his words, his voice hoarse. "Goldenheart.. please."

Goldenheart tried to resist Sharpclaw's pleads. She tried to ignore them. She tried to convince herself that he was just a faux; that he was just a leaf that had fallen at her paws from the same tree as Jayheart. The orange she-cat started picking up her pace in a dash for safety, the ashen-like she-kit dangling from fastened jaws and mewling with distress. Sharpclaw started bounding across the stones so that his calls could just about reach Goldenheart's ears.

Sharpclaw hit a nerve. "I'll take her!" he yowled frantically. His voice echoed around the whole forest, so much every Clan could probably hear it. It set Goldenheart to pause in her tracks. Sharpclaw couldn't read her expression, but after a few heartbeats, he saw that her fur almost went completely flat. Goldenheart reluctantly turned around, wet tears placed under her eyelids.

It felt like water had splashed over her; the water of relief. She seemed to admit in her heart that Sharpclaw was honest and reliable. Her relief was soon replaced with sorrow as she gazed back down at the light grey kit. "This is for the best, Moonkit," Goldenheart murmured. "I won't forget you, I promise." She gently stroked the kit's shoulder with her tongue, whispering a goodbye.

"The only thing is," Sharpclaw meowed weakly. "We have to stop our meetings, Goldenheart. It'll be best for us.. for Moonkit." Goldenheart's eyes flashed with pain, the breath being torn from her lungs.

However, she didn't have to utter a word. All of her feelings were already radiating off of her like the sun's rays. She wrapped her jaws gently around Moonkit's scruff, quietly hauling her up off of the ground and handing the light grey she-kit into Sharpclaw's grasp. Moonkit stayed silent and didn't resist a heartbeat, as if abiding to the devious fate she had; a burden that had been placed upon her with the strictness of the warrior code itself that her mother had vague knowledge of. Goldenheart watched lovingly, yet sorrowfully as Moonkit became a blur and slowly exited her vision. She was glad Moonkit would be safe in Sharpclaw's Clan, but the fact that she may have to fight her own kit haunted her; the fact

that she may never share many words with her at all; the fact that Moonkit may not even know Goldenheart was her mother.

// Chapter One

A blossom sky aligned with stars reached over the horizon. A waterfall stormed down into another body, led into direction by rocks and other stones, fog floating in the air at the top. Trees that bursted in color were planted around as scenery. Thickets of undergrowth were placed at various places, flooding the clearing with life. A faded ginger she-cat was placed on top of a pile of rocks, her eyes darting over towards another shape that emerged out of the bushes.

The figure, a tortoiseshell molly, lifted her gaze, fixing it onto the other she-cat and slightly gaping at her view. "Dapplestar?" it mewed in curiosity. "You called me here."

Dapplestar took a moment to reply. "Yes," she replied wisely. "I have news. Once every cat arrives I'll announce it." Dapplestar was a faded ginger, former ThunderClan leader with brown freckles on her muzzle and neck. She had a long scar placed across her back, a torn ear, and a scar lined across her belly as a representation of her experience.

The tortoiseshell arranged beside her, glancing at the sky. She tried to keep patient and respectful towards the ThunderClan leader. She could not fathom how Dapplestar could stay tolerant of the time that passed while many problems needed to be addressed.

Dapplestar, I hope this is as important as you are putting it off to be, the tortoiseshell mused to herself. After moments of waiting, a figure slid through the bushes at the edge of the plot. The tortoiseshell stared at the brown tom that cursed to himself as he flicked branches from his pelt onto the ground.

"What'd you get my fur ruffled up for?" the brown tom spat. He shifted his eyes over to look at Dapplestar, who sat unaffected at the peak of the precipice. "Well?"

"The forest is falling into chaos," Dapplestar spoke, her fur ruffling

up. The tortoiseshell lifted her head and bristled in fear, while the tom was expressionless.

The dusty tom's tail twitched. "Chaos is.. a choice of wording," he rasped. "I don't think it's quite accurate." The tortoiseshell looked at the tom in a bit of disbelief and a pang of sorrow.

"Spruceclaw," the tortoiseshell started. "Cherryfern, the old medicine cat," she paused for a second. "my mentor's mentor... was slaughtered in front of the Clan for having kits with another cat. She did break the warrior code, but she did not deserve such treatment. At least not in my eyes."

Spruceclaw froze for a moment. "Maybe it was gruesome," Spruceclaw responded, his voice traced with a twinge of pity. "But how else could Robinstar have conveyed her point? Her kits had contributed to a rival Clan, and one of them ended up killing Robinstar's deputy."

"Yes," Dapplestar admitted, shaking her head. "Too many deaths over border skirmishes. That is what I am here to address. Cats are not hesitating to murder a cat from another Clan."

Spruceclaw did not look up. "And your solution?" he asked curtly, not admitting if he was right or wrong. Dapplestar took a moment to reply, trying to raise suspense to grab the other cats' attention. Spruceclaw noticed, rolling his eyes.

"These blood-spilling traditions have been going on for too long," the tortoiseshell meowed. "Cats are losing faith in us."

Spruceclaw glimpsed over at the amber-eyed she-cat. "When we've stepped in we've only made things worse," he growled. "We should leave more freedom for the Clans. They can make their own choices."

Dapplestar intervened and meowed, "That's not the point." She continued, "Cats are dying. It *is* our turn to step in."

The tortoiseshell nodded. Spruceclaw scoffed, muttering, "As always, no cat listens to me."

"Two will shatter the path to chaos, their pelts gleaming to even the most stubborn of eyes," Dapplestar spoke, dealing a quick glance to Spruceclaw at the word "stubborn." She gaped her jaws again, meowing,"That is the plan."

The three shapes were then hurled into a vision. Dazed, they shot each other glances and shifted their gazes different directions. Two half-transparent figures stood in the middle of the dell, their optics glimmering with determination. Spruceclaw snorted in disgust as he noticed the lack of scars and muscle on figures.

"Who are they?" Spruceclaw spat. "Kits?" Dapplestar ignored him, staring with satisfaction towards the two figures. Her tail smugly curled around her feet as she watched with fascination towards the luminous shapes.

The tortoiseshell tried to identify the two cats' pelt colors, squinting her eyes. One looked a bit more furry; but they both were starry and bright. She couldn't help but stifle a smile.

"A prophecy!" she huffed in joy. "Two cats will save the forest!"

Spruceclaw's expression did not alter. "Quailfeather, you're always easily amused," he started, his eyes turning to slits. "You couldn't even notice how puny the 'Two' were!" Spruceclaw spat, before shifting over and fixed his gaze angrily onto Dapplestar's. "How could you think this could *ever* work?"

"Blood is not always the answer," Dapplestar mewed. She kept herself calm, keeping her hackles flat and expression composed. Spruceclaw whisked around furiously, deep in disbelief towards the two she-cats.

Quailfeather couldn't help but become uneasy. "I'm a mouse if you think this will ever work!" Spruceclaw hissed again. Dapplestar launched herself off of the ledge she stood on.

"I have received this prophecy," Dapplestar retorted. "It has great potential. Spruceclaw, you don't have a right to speak to your ancestors as such."

"Such a pity," Spruceclaw spat, veering around to face Dapplestar. "You don't have control of every cat in your life anymore."

"Is that so?" Dapplestar snorted. "Because it looks like I'm the only cat willing to stand up for the Clans."

"Did I just hear you right?" Spruceclaw countered, his voice laced with disgust. "We all want to retrieve the forest; but your ways are as poorly thought of as a kit's. If anything, you're going to be the one to destroy it."

"Your arrogance baffles me," Dapplestar insulted.

"Mine?" Spruceclaw discorded, his tail lashing. "You're the one tossing two inexperienced warriors into this prophecy! They have as much strength as an apprentice!"

Quailfeather's pupils paced around at the two quarreling StarClan cats in fear. She was pressuring herself to negotiate something. She should be best at this; she was a medicine cat, anyways. It would only be so long until some cat heard Dapplestar and Spruceclaw's bickering.

"I'll repeat it," Dapplestar hissed. "Blood is not always the answer."

"Really?" Spruceclaw snarled, unsheathing his claws into the ground. "Because some is about to be spilled."

"Stop!" Quailfeather finally screeched, her voice being drowned out by the faded ginger she-cat and the brown tom.

"You are disobeying StarClan's will," Dapplestar retaliated, her voice threaded with anger. Spruceclaw's fur rose in anger, and his ears fell back on his head. Quailfeather was afraid they were going to leap at each other; emerging into a clashing ball of fur.

She felt like she was helpless in halting the quarrel. Fear enveloped her, setting her fur standing straight up. Suddenly, a vision of blood-lust invaded her mind. All four of the Clans were staring lividly into each other's eyes and unsheathed their claws. They made a leap, hurling into a cluster of brawling balls of fur. Quailfeather choked inside of all the fighting. She felt

claustrophobic. She couldn't move. She couldn't escape.

"Help!" she wailed. "Please..."

Quailfeather was useless. The fray grew worse. Cats cried out in agony and fury, swinging out with brutal claws and razor-sharp fangs. There was a great war approaching.

Quailfeather snapped open her eyes. Dapplestar and Spruceclaw had vanished. *Was I the only one to see the vision?* Quailfeather padded across the clearing. She felt her heart thumping in her chest. The vision suddenly erupted into her mind again, and she felt a shiver crawl up her spine. Weak, wounded figures stammered onto weary paws, lunging back at each other with savage blows.

But something soft touched Qailfeather's paws. She glimpsed down.

A hawk's feather stood at her feet.

// Chapter Two

"Thank you StarClan for the prey that has been given," Spottedpelt meowed, dipping her head to a fresh-kill rabbit. The rabbit had a grey coat and a still, dysfunctional body.

Spottedpelt hauled the rabbit up by the neck, blinking open her eyes. Her partner, Flakepelt, travelled over through the moor towards her with a shrew in his jaws. He gave her a slight nod.

The two figures were surrounded by a long blanket of rolling plains, sand expanses, and moors, with long rows of ferns and shrubs that swayed in the long gusts of wind. The WindClan territory was prone to the spine-crawling element. Spottedpelt and Flakepelt practically ignored the wind as they traipsed near to the edges of the meadow.

"I hope the Clan will be thankful for what we caught," Flakepelt sighed. "Jayheart never seems to thank us for the prey we bring back. He pushes us away and assigns us on more patrols."

Spottedpelt took a moment to reply. "Well, I'm sure he's just busy," she meowed through a mouthful of rabbit fur. She knew in her mind, though, that her statement probably wasn't true. Jayheart never treated her nicely. She always prayed that maybe, just maybe there was a sincere layer to him, in that maybe he was just stressed with his deputy position.

"You're his own daughter," Flakepelt protested. "I've never seen him treat you like an equal. I don't think it's fair."

"Not everything is fair," Spottedpelt admitted.

"But you need to stand up for yourself!" Flakepelt insisted with urgency. Spottedpelt's fur bristled at Flakepelt's demand.

"What do I have to stand for?" Spottedpelt queried, making an effort to keep her tone reasonable and calm. She always felt nervous around Jayheart. She was afraid he would rip her fur off in his fury.

"You have everything to stand up for!" Flakepelt exclaimed. Spottedpelt's coat went hot. "Jayheart doesn't consider your opinion. He treats you like an apprentice!"

Spottedpelt's tone was doubtful. "You don't know if he considers my opinion or not," she retorted.

Flakepelt exhibited a surrendering puff. "Let's just finish our hunting trip," he presumed dryly. Spottedpelt grunted in agreement, not wanting to drop the prey from her jaws.

She sprung around a gathering of logs and bushes of thorns, bolted through a small dip in the ground, and finally emerged in front of her Clanmate. Vinestar had assigned them to check the territory in the Bordering Marsh on the edge of the ThunderClan border. Spottedpelt's neck fur lifted. The strong stench of ThunderClan stung her nostrils. It was half a dozen tail-lengths inside of WindClan territory.

Spottedpelt set down her prey, and her eyes widened. *Keep calm.* She investigated the scent. It soaked the brambles and bracken at the marsh, absorbing into the mud and filling the air. Her fear and anxiety increased as she saw starling feathers dispersed in the middle of the scene. It seemed the ThunderClan invaders made no effort to hide their scent.

"ThunderClan!" Flakepelt growled, voice laced with anger and fear. "They stole prey from our territory."

Spottedpelt didn't reply; she was deep in trance of investigating the scene. *Why are you so worried? It's just some ThunderClan scent.* Spottedpelt couldn't help her discomfort, though. The ThunderClan cats were strong and brave. She hoped if her Clan did get in trouble with ThunderClan they would be able to settle it.

"We need to tell this to Vinestar!" Flakepelt prompted.

"Okay," was all Spottedpelt could reply with as she was half in a daze. *Vinestar should be able to solve this.* A second uncertain comment tugged at Spottedpelt's mind: *I hope.*

The leopard-like she-cat and the senior warrior bolted off. Spottedpelt felt her adrenaline pump. Not just because ThunderClan warriors were provoking them, but she was also unsure on how Vinestar would handle it. She had a small dare inside of her to not tell Vinestar; believing she could do better. But she immediately eliminated that thought. She didn't want to get ahead of herself. *He probably knows what he's doing better than I do.*

Spottedpelt's paws ached with weariness. A great feeling of qualm was weighing her down. She bolted through the thickets of bracken; her fur getting buffeted by wind. The tide battled with her as it stormed through the clearing. She darted faster. Sand started being flung into her eyes as she emerged into sandy ground, weakening her vision.

She hauled herself through the windstorm. It felt like she was being blasted with force; getting thrown back and being unable to withdraw from the gusts. The sand felt like waves of mosquitoes nipping at her pelt. Her vision was a blur; but she could still find the scent of WindClan pasted around. She was pretty sure she knew the way to camp.

"Ugh!" Flakepelt hissed. His eyes were blazing with irritation.

The storm intensified. Spottedpelt lifted her head. She could feel sand at her paws, and large boulders interrupted the sandy plot. She shook her head, emptying her ears of tiny particles of dust. The wind seemed to calm down enough for Spottedpelt to make out the location.

"Fox dung!" Flakepelt spat. "We went the wrong way!"

Spottedpelt recognized the Training Dune. It was a sand dune a few fox-lengths long. Mentors would take their apprentices for hunting practice there. She felt a bit annoyed at herself and Flakepelt.

"Let's just turn around," Spottedpelt meowed awkwardly. "We need to hurry."

Flakepelt grunted in response. The two felines hiked through the sandy moors; this time only through fewer particles. They were

surrounded by layers of sand that were dumped on the ground with a few boulders set at random locations.

Spottedpelt followed the outline of Flakepelt's snow-like pelt; bolting over the ledges and stones in pursuit of camp. Sand flying in the air and that brushed from her paws made her wince as it pricked her all over her pelt and choked her. Spottedpelt's heart sped up. She didn't even have time to worry. Her solid gaze focused on the ground ahead of her. She sprung over fallen and deserted branches with the agility and strength of a leopard, pelting forwards ahead of Flakepelt.

Spottedpelt's feet ached with weariness. She trailed on heavily. The sandstorm had become weaker as the blonde and black-spotted she-cat galloped on. She felt her paws tremble, almost slipping in the sand. She awkwardly regained her balance, taking a moment to breathe.

"It was quite mouse-brained of Jayheart to send us on to the other side of the moor," Flakepelt remarked in an irritated tone.

Spottedpelt started plodding on as she waited for Flakepelt to pick up the pace. "Come on," she urged. "We're almost to camp."

Spottedpelt started to dart off again. She heard the light paws of Flakepelt's behind her. She could see the faint outlines of the Wind Stone along with sleek, lithe figures. Her prey still dangled in her jaws, littered with sand. *No cat would want to eat prey seasoned with sand.*

Her weariness seemed to vanish as she approached the entrance. Webshine stood in between two boulders that marked the mouth of camp.

"The sandstorm got pretty rough, eh?" Webshine asked. She looked down at the sand-covered fresh-kill that hung at Flakepelt and Spottedpelt's jaws. Spottedpelt replied with a nervous chuckle. "No cat can see past that," Webshine added, her voice laced with humor. "You both look like *sand*pelts to me."

Flakepelt didn't have time to show his annoyance. "Um, yeah," he

muttered awkwardly. "We really need to talk to Vinestar."

Webshine pointed her tail toward the center of camp. "Go ahead," she instructed. Flakepelt and Spottedpelt gave her grateful nods.

Flakepelt and Spottedpelt rushed over to the fresh-kill pile, gently setting down their prey. They sat up from the dent in the ground. Their pelts were coated with particles of sand, and warriors around the WindClan camp were giving them weird looks.

"You can go clean off," Spottedpelt offered to Flakepelt. "I'll go talk to Vinestar." Flakepelt gave the she-cat a faint nod in response.

Spottedpelt padded over to Vinestar's den. There was a dip in the ground with an overhang of stone that was settled over the cleft. She heard overlapping voices echoing inside of the den, belonging to Jayheart and Vinestar.

"It bewilders me," Jayheart spat dryly. "That Logstar had made you deputy."

Vinestar sat on the floor of the den, his tail lashing. His frail gaze burned with anger at the WindClan deputy. His eyes were narrowed, and he seemed angered with every word that emerged out of Jayheart's jaws. "Are you *never* thankful?" Vinestar growled contemptuously. "I made you deputy. I picked *you* out of all the warriors of WindClan."

"So this is all about you?" Jayheart countered. "It is a mouse-brained idea!"

"Too bad," Vinestar replied dryly.

What idea? Spottedpelt felt a pang of guilt for listening into their conversation. Her hackles were risen. She wanted to pad away, but the suspense lured her in.

"You're going to threaten to attack ShadowClan in the Gathering," Jayheart continued. "They're going to be prepared. We need to take them by surprise, for StarClan's sake!"

Spottedpelt froze. Her heart lurched with fear. Vinestar couldn't

threaten another Clan at a Gathering while they already had a possible problem with ThunderClan! Spottedpelt needed to stop Vinestar from doing so. *But I'm just an ordinary warrior!* She unsheathed her claws into the ground in anger. She realized there may not be a way to stop Vinestar and Jayheart, and that she would just have to pray her Clan leader wouldn't cause chaos within her Clan.

No more voices came. Spottedpelt had a bad feeling rising in her stomach. Paws thundered toward the entrance. Spottedpelt felt restricted for making any movement. Her terror pinned her to the ground.

Vinestar hauled himself out of his den. Once he met Spottedpelt's optics, he immediately knew she had been there before by her terrified look. Jayheart brushed up beside the broad tom.

"YOU EAVESDROPPED?" Jayheart roared.

Spottedpelt couldn't even find the strength to speak. Her fur bristled, and she was drowning in her fear. She couldn't fathom how any cat could be so intimidated by her own leader. Jayheart gazed at her coldly. Spottedpelt couldn't feel any bond with him. She didn't feel like Jayheart was even her father. But she knew he was, and she tried to think back to times in the nursery where he would occasionally visit them. He was younger back then, but with many of the same scars. He never seemed to be able to smile fully.

"You're banned from tonight's Gathering, Spottedpelt, and the rest for further notice," Vinestar growled, seeming as if he was holding back the urge to rip Spottedpelt to shreds. "You're lucky you didn't get in more trouble. Next time I won't go so easy on you."

Vinestar flicked out of the way, followed by Jayheart. But Spottedpelt feared it could be the worst punishment of all. She wouldn't get to find out what happens at the Gathering; nor what could happen. *And I'm a mouse if Vinestar or Jayheart even consider telling me about it.*

// Chapter Three

Thistlepaw grasped a wad of moss from the cleft of a tree, groaning with annoyance. *Senior apprentices shouldn't have to do this task.* He glanced back over his shoulder where Squirrelchase observed him. His expression was trying to be encouraging. He flicked his ears forwards and smiled, trying to urge Thistlepaw to go on.

Thistlepaw tore another and another sheet. He lowered his head to place the moss onto his pile, feeling the gaze of his mentor burning into his pelt. His neck fur rose with the realization that he was being watched every time he was out with his mentor. *Can't I just be a warrior already?*

He stuck his head back into the gap where another clump of moss waited for him. He felt even more awkward as Squirrelchase watched him scramble deep in the decaying bark. *Does ShadowClan really have no one else for this role? I'm sure the elders could get their own bedding if they'd just get off their lazy hindquarters,* he thought spitefully.

Thistlepaw fastened another sheet of moss between his teeth, reversing out of the dip. He glimpsed over at her pile of the bedding, setting his new collection onto the stack. There were about half a dozen sheets of moss beside the large pine towering beside him.

He had enough of the monotonous task. "Why should the *senior* apprentices have to do this job?" He hissed. "There are plenty of cats in ShadowClan to collect moss!"

Squirrelchase blinked at him. "You need to learn to do other tasks," he instructed, his tail twitching once as he raised his chin. "Other than just battle training all the time."

"Isn't that what being a ShadowClan warrior is about?" Thistlepaw protested in a growl, flexing his claws in the soil. "We're *supposed* to be the fiercest Clan in the forest."

Squirrelchase wasn't amused by Thistlepaw's defiant tone. He narrowed his eyes. "Life isn't just about being superior over all the other Clans," he responded.

Thistlepaw snorted in disgust. *There's no way to put some sense into any of these cats. Just because we're young doesn't mean we're not smart.* He didn't bother saying another word; instead he gathered half the stack of moss, signaling his mentor to take the rest. He bounded ahead, skirting past pine trees and brambles that blocked his path. He eventually heard Squirrelchase's swift pace behind him.

He boosted himself forward; not wanting to confront his mentor. He could imagine his irritated look, his mouth moving as he scolded him. Humiliation set his fur to bristle as he imagined his Clanmates giving him judging looks. He leaped over thorn bushes and briars, not daring to pause once. He hadn't gone far from camp. The scent of ShadowClan reeked stronger in the air.

Bushes, shrubs, and undergrowth were fixed around Thistlepaw. They guarded the barrier of the ShadowClan camp; trying to snag onto his pelt like the claws of enemy Clan cats in a battle. Thistlepaw had to skid to a halt to solve the puzzle of getting into camp, only to hear paw steps growing closer.

"Listen," Squirrelchase huffed as he stifled exhausted breaths. "I know you'll eventually learn what I mean. Trust me."

Thistlepaw didn't respond. He let Squirrelchase's words roll off his back like crow-food. His mentor seemed disappointed in his resentment but tried to hide it. Thistlepaw lunged over one of the thorn bushes; landing perfectly onto the ground and clenching his teeth harder to keep his collected moss from escaping his grasp.

Squirrelchase shuffled up behind him. He kept examining his apprentice, concerned. He padded up beside him. Thistlepaw didn't meet his gaze; instead he was focused on a leap over a large bush. After wiggling his haunches against the ground, he ascended through the air before crashing onto his paws.

Squirrelchase peeked through the bushes as Thistlepaw raced ahead. Eaglefeather stood inside the camp, right beside the entrance

that led into a ravine. He glanced behind him, dipping his head to Thistlepaw, and Squirrelchase who just landed beside him.

Thistlepaw brushed past his educator's pelt, wordless. Eaglefeather appeared to deem his behavior as unusual, following him with his gaze for a few heartbeats before turning to his mentor.

"He's always been overly ambitious," Squirrelchase meowed in a gasp for breath. He paused; as if recalling a memory.

"Well," Eaglefeather started. "She's going to become a warrior soon. Her ambitions should be satisfied then."

"It seems like it's more than that-" Squirrelchase replied, before getting cut off by Thistlepaw's hiss. Thistlepaw was staring at Squirrelchase with an impatient look and a lashing tail, the moss he gathered stiffly hanging out of his jaws. Squirrelchase jerked his ears in response and hissed at the apprentice's impatience, turning back to face Eaglefeather.

Thistlepaw trekked towards the elders' den; a large structure with boulders to sun on outside a comfy, warm bed of shrubs, leaves, and twigs. He glanced back impatiently for his mentor, his tail starting to whip faster. *I shouldn't get my ears clawed off by myself!* He sighed and forced himself to let his tail go limp instead of letting it wack every cantankerous elder in the face once he arrived in their den.

"Ugh," an elder rasped. "When will the hunting patrol be back?" Thistlepaw's ears pricked and he recognized the voice of Badgereye.

The other murmurs of ShadowClan elders drowned out Badgereye's voice. "Continuing on with the story, it probably was for the best that SkyClan broke up into the Clans," Sparrowfeather remarked.

"But did StarClan want that?" Heavycloud meowed in a skeptical tone.

"It's too late," Fountainfur mewed. "SkyClan's already gone. There's nothing else we can do. At least they didn't die out.." *Huh. I've never heard many cats talk about SkyClan.. only the elders do, apparently.*

They can't ever keep their mouths shut. Which can be a good thing for me..

Thistlepaw wanted to listen in more. He prayed that his mentor hadn't arrived to join him already. Relief washed over him as he saw the dark ginger tom speaking to Eaglefeather with his share of moss next to his paws. Thistlepaw's ears swiveled towards the direction of the elders as he detected another voice.

"And now their Clan is no more," Sparrowfeather squeaked. "We can only trust StarClan that we made the right decision."

It seemed the elders' quick conversation was coming to an end. A few heartbeats passed. Thistlepaw kept himself alert. He normally dreaded when the elders would go on and on about a stupid story; but this discussion caught his attention. *Maybe they aren't completely useless... but they definitely have a lot of wasted potential.* He curled his lip. *They use all of us when they're perfectly capable of many things.*

"They did have some unique traditions," Badgereye meowed, butting into the silence. "Did you know that they had a ritual where an apprentice can face an enemy of the Clan? If the apprentice defeats this foe, they would automatically become a warrior." Other elders looked quite interested, some chattering to themselves.

"Where did you find this out?" Fountainfur inquired, suspicion glowing in her eyes.

Badgereye hesitated. "I had a friend there," she meowed, slightly annoyed at her fellow elder questioning her.

Suddenly, SkyClan seemed vaguely familiar to Thistlepaw. He felt as if he could feel their scent flooding into his nostrils. His veins filled with determination. *If SkyClan blood is still flowing in the Clans,* he speculated. *I might be able to be a legend and defeat a ShadowClan foe. Cats will finally listen to me! Maybe even StarClan will value me, and when I die, give me a whole dignified place to rest! Whatever I need to do, however I can find these SkyClan cats, I will!* Excitement filled him, giving him the urge to dash off and start his journey. But he knew he couldn't. *But what am I thinking? I-I'm just an apprentice, and-*

Thistlepaw was then tossed into a vision. He felt a soft tongue gently sweeping across his fur. He inhaled as many scents as he could in his nose. He didn't scent ShadowClan. He scented... someone else. He knew what other Clans' scent was like; and he could not find any drop of any recognizable scent.

Thistlepaw wriggled around. *Who does this cat think they are? I'm almost a full grown warrior!* He thrashed around and tried to open his eyes. They were glued shut. Thistlepaw felt a wave of panic jolt through him. *What in StarClan is happening?*

"Stop squirming around, Thistlekit," the she-cat hissed. *Thistle*kit*?*

Thistlepaw realized he was not in the present time. Was she in a vision from StarClan? Was he dreaming? *Did this really happen?* The other character's tongue swept across Thistlepaw's face. Thistlepaw felt slightly comforted, but was astrayed in his confused thoughts. He felt like he had a connection with the other figure. Hazed memories started storming into his mind. The flash of violent figures suddenly appeared before his eyes. *I can see now.*

He saw a broad tabby, *Vinestar.* The WindClan leader, followed by hordes of other warriors, rushed into where Thistlepaw lurked, crushing everything in their paths. In another memory, Thistlepaw felt pain shoot through him, and saw a faint figure strolling towards him with a vicious look. *There's more things cats aren't telling me. Was that from StarClan? Do they support me? What if-*

"Thistlepaw!" Squirrelchase hissed, jolting Thistlepaw out of his thoughts. Thistlepaw winced and looked up at his mentor, narrowing his eyes and letting out a hiss. Squirrelchase was holding his portion of moss in his jaws, looking with irritation at Thistlepaw. Badgereye, Heavycloud, Sparrowfeather, and Fountainfur were waiting outside of the elders' den entrance. Badgereye's gaze was irritated; while Fountainfur could at least show a bit of sympathy for the young apprentice.

"Oh, now you're here," Thistlepaw muttered under his breath.

"It's about time," Badgereye grunted, narrowing her eyes towards the younger ShadowClan cat.

Thistlepaw wrinkled his face back to his previous expression at Badgereye's remark; realizing his paws were still in ShadowClan's camp and not on some magical cloud. He clutched his share of moss inside of his jaws; still musing of how he would prove herself to ShadowClan. He had always been an ambitious fighter. *I need to defeat a great foe,* Thistlepaw contemplated. *Maybe another Clan cat. Maybe a dog. Anything I can find.*.

He tried not to be out of ordinary. He didn't want to be hissed at and judged again. He set down a plot of moss, prodding it flat. A few heartbeats passed before he flattened it completely and dragged it over towards Badgereye's nest. Thistlepaw paused and lugged the old bedding that sat in the spot a few whisker-lengths away from the entrance of the den.

He then darted back, carefully setting down the sheet of moss that was reserved for Badgereye. Squirrelchase removed Fountainfur's old bedding; tossing the crumbled moss toward the entrance. *At least he's helping.*

As Thistlepaw started finishing up his job, he started to forget about his mission. But as he was setting Heavycloud's moss onto the grass; remembrance came back to him. His stomach twisted with uncertainty and uneasiness. How would he defeat a great foe? He couldn't leave camp without his mentor. Was it even possible in the situation he was in?

"Good job," Squirrelchase praised. "You can go off to do your own thing now." *At least he shows some gratefulness as well.*

Thistlepaw nodded and darted off; relieved that judging gazes no longer burned into his skin. He strolled over towards the edge of camp; lowering his forepaws into a small puddle to wash the moss bits off of them. After a few heartbeats, he lifted her paws out from the puddle, caressing them with gentle licks.

The urge tugged onto his heart to visit his blind and deaf brother, Brinekit. He was one of Goldenheart, his mother's, second litter. Mosspelt had diagnosed Brinekit of being blind. Thistlepaw remembered large amount of crust lined on his eyelids, and when Mosspelt had slightly licked them open, all that was there was a

blue haze of eyes.

Thistlepaw approached the nursery; an inviting structure built with logs, leaves, and pine needles. Goldenheart's apricot coat shined in the late sun's light. She was gently grooming the tom-kit. Thistlepaw felt waves of pity gush through him for his brother.

"How was training?" Goldenheart meowed in a mouthful of licks.

"Er, it was..." Thistlepaw replied awkwardly. "Fine." Goldenheart must not of known he had to gather moss for the elders for his only assignment that day. *It's not like I'm still in the nursery and she's watching my every move.*

Goldenheart curled her tail behind two small figures. Thistlepaw recognized them as Shimmerkit and Moonkit. Shimmerkit had a dark brown coat with black spots as Moonkit had a full light grey pelt. They squirmed around in a row of squeaks. None of Goldenheart's second litter had opened their eyes yet.

Pigeonpaw, Thistlepaw's brother, bounded up to the nursery. "Mosspelt says they should've opened their eyes by now," he meowed as he brushed up next to Thistlepaw.

"They're only a day and a half old," Goldenheart responded softly; trying not to frighten her kits.

"Mosspelt isn't even allowed to have kits," Thistlepaw growled coldly. "How would she even know about taking care of them?"

Pigeonpaw's fur bristled. "She's had a lot of experience in the past," he responded.

"Well, whatever," Thistlepaw huffed, angry that StarClan had given Brinekit a life without seeing or hearing. He gazed down at his younger brother; a fragile scrap of fur for a kit. *How could a kit that's deaf and blind even survive as a warrior, or even as an apprentice? How could he ever be happy or satisfied with himself?*

Then the words repeated in Thistlepaw's head again: *They did have some unique traditions. Did you know that they had a ritual where an apprentice can face an enemy of the Clan? If the apprentice defeats this*

foe, they would automatically become a warrior.

// Chapter Four

Whitestar stood at the front of the arrangement of ShadowClan cats. Thistlepaw trailed beside Splashpaw; a slightly younger apprentice with a white and ginger coat and green eyes. Goldenheart fell in behind her. The full moon's bulky body illuminated in the sky.

"Are you excited?" Splashpaw asked, shifting her eager gaze to Thistlepaw.

"It depends on what *excited* means," Thistlepaw retorted. After a few moments of awkward silence, he added, "I'm excited to hear about the other Clans' secrets, yes."

Splashpaw couldn't think of anything else to say, so she padded up to her brother, Thrushpaw. The crack of pine straw then indicated Goldenheart's quickened pace that emerged closer to Thistlepaw.

"You're going to become a warrior soon," Goldenheart meowed. "One of these days. Aren't you glad all of your training is going to pay off?"

Not all of it. I don't understand how getting moss for the elders what feels like every other sunrise is classified as training. And there's my goal. I have to achieve it. Maybe if I do, StarClan will reward me. Maybe I will receive more visions. "Mhm," Thistlepaw lied. Goldenheart nodded and smiled proudly. The warriors seemed to have started treating him more like a true warrior than a whiney kit that just left the nursery.

"How's Brinekit doing?" Thistlepaw asked, his paws shifting uneasily in the straw beneath him as the group ventured on. He could imagine the tom blankly sleeping and felt guilt as his empty destiny seemed to unfold before her.

"Alright," Goldenheart replied grimly. "For a kit who's lost two of its senses."

Thistlepaw felt like a paw jabbed him in the ribs at Goldenheart's response. Brinekit's pitiful life was still plastered in his mind. It was stronger than before. He shook her head, blinking and adjusting his perception to the moment he stood in.

Authors note: i apologize for the ableist way Brinekit is portrayed. Warriors was not that good of an example for disabled characters so I got the mindset of a cat's life being blind and deaf simply a "pitiful life" from that. I wrote this many years ago and my stories are not like that anymore! People who are *completely* deaf and blind are very rare, and I'm unsure on how they particularly would communicate, even with research I'm not sure for completely deaf blind people how that would work. I'm sure there's some way though with the tech age we're in (found some research where people can feel sign language, it's really cool!). However, with cats, many of their senses are stronger and therefore it would be easier to live with the condition Brinekit is in (specifically smell).

He recognized the border he and his mentor often patrolled. He felt a bit of relief that Squirrelchase didn't come to the Gathering with him. Recently he's felt quite awkward around him. He wanted to become a warrior for so many reasons; but he couldn't if she didn't do what StarClan wanted, and what he knew would make her Clan better. *But why should I want to satisfy ancestors that gave Brinekit barely a life?* But maybe StarClan didn't have control over it. He sighed, continuing on.

He ducked under large branches and WindClan scent stung his nostrils. An abandoned Thunderpath that had cracks traced into it stretched a few whisker-lengths away from his paws. Its repulsive stench burned Thistlepaw's nostrils. His muzzle wrinkled up in an effort to stop the fragrant from growing stronger. The path stood as a scent marker and border between the two Clans, ending towards RiverClan territory.

"What are we waiting for?" Whitestar coaxed. "Come on."

Thistlepaw reluctantly followed Whitestar's orders. He bolted over the Thunderpath, placing his paws on the unusual texture. Goldenheart came next, followed by Thrushpaw and Splashpaw.

Whitestar, Robinfeather, Dusttail, and Mousefang had already arrived on the opposite side of the path.

Pawprints and fresh WindClan, RiverClan, and ThunderClan scent that reeked in the air indicated the group of cats were looming close to Two Trees. They rushed over ferns that pointed into the air, brushed past gatherings of bracken, and leaped over thickets of brambles.

Two enormous oaks stretched towards the sky. They towered over the clearing like mountains, clutching the clearing with their branches. Vinestar impatiently stood at the foot of the Star Rock with his tail twitching with the other three Clans' attenders arranged inside of the clearing.

Whitestar raced inside of the clearing, followed by his chosen cats, Thistlepaw being among them. The black and brown 'paw scanned the glade. He saw a bunch of WindClan cats meowing to each other. He recognized Jayheart, Littlefoot, Flakepelt, Emberpaw, and Lionrage. He also spotted a cluster of RiverClan cats: Creekmist, Minnowpool, Spiderdawn, Sharpclaw, and Spikepaw. He also recognized Sharkpaw, who was talking with an unfamiliar ThunderClan apprentice that had a faded ginger pelt. *Huh. I guess that one must be new.*

Before Thistlepaw could recall any more warriors, Vinestar's yowl rung around the clearing. "The Gathering has begun!"

Cats closed their chattering mouths, giving their attention to the WindClan leader. Whitestar had scrambled up beside Lightstar. He stared at Vinestar, ready for him to continue.

"Lakestar, would you like to go first?" Vinestar offered through clenched teeth. Thistlepaw narrowed his eyes. Vinestar seemed indignant of something.. or *someone.*

Lakestar bowed his head respectfully. "Very well." After a quick glance around Two Trees, he cleared his throat; looking down at the clusters of warriors that waited for him to speak. "Prey has been running well this greenleaf," he started. Two WindClan warriors, Thistlepaw recognized them as Spottedpelt and Flakepelt, cast

reluctant and slightly angered glances to the ThunderClan leader. "But leaf-fall is approaching. We must all prepare."

Thistlepaw noticed Vinestar was gazing furiously at Whitestar and didn't pay one mouse-length of attention to Lakestar's words. He exhibited a shiver. Something seemed to be going on between the two Clans. Resentment of being an apprentice once again snapped through Thistlepaw. He was determined to know more about what's happening with his Clan and the WindClanners. *But you can't be a warrior until you beat a foe,* he reminded himself. *I must be honored by my Clan and be more than an ordinary warrior if they will listen to me about the memories and visions I have received. They think only medicine cats can receive "proper" dreams. I can prove them wrong.*

"ThunderClan also has two new apprentices," Lakestar continued, interrupting Thistlepaw's thoughts. He pointed his tail over to two young figures. The new apprentice Thistlepaw had spotted before was among them, along with a ginger tabby she-cat. "Yarrowpaw and Dawnpaw, step up."

Yarrowpaw, followed by Dawnpaw, clambered onto the Star Rock. They both hauled themselves up onto the boulder; staring nervously down onto the bunches of cats. Thistlepaw narrowed his eyes to the other apprentices. *Great. Now there's more ThunderClan apprentices to oppose us.*

The apprentices' spotlight broke up, and they both carefully made their way off of the Star Rock. They dug their claws into the stone and kept their balance, venturing back to the company of their Clanmates.

Lightstar then stepped up to the edge of the Star Rock. His ice blue eyes glimmered in pride. "Prey has been plentiful in RiverClan thanks to the river," he broadcasted; his voice strong and confident. He shifted his gaze to look over at Lakestar. "But as Lakestar has said; that won't last forever. We must prepare."

Chatters of approval travelled through the large crowd under the Star Rock. Vinestar, however, looked like he was about to explode in his wrath. Thistlepaw's fur bristled. WindClan never seemed the same after Vinestar took over the Clan. That's what Goldenheart

had told him. Thistlepaw wouldn't be one to argue with her claim. *Vinestar seems to be holding many secrets and grudges to himself,* Thistlepaw observed. And he felt maybe his age was getting to him, too. He didn't know what he was planning, but he saw Jayheart curling his lip back to the ShadowClan warriors. Anger rose in Thistlepaw's chest. He must've had something to do with Vinestar's plan. *The one who betrayed my mother.*

Whitestar, too, had started noticing his rancor expression, and the fur along his spine started to rise. Lightstar bowed his head and backed up. Whitestar pushed himself to ignore Vinestar's gaze; stepping forward in trying to hide his fur that stuck up. Vinestar glimpsed at the snowy leader; his expression getting fiercer. Many ShadowClan cats began to catch onto Vinestar's anger, and their ears pricked and they exchanged reluctant glances beside Thistlepaw. He could hear the pounding of many hearts; even his own.

"ShadowClan has three new kits," Whitestar finally announced. This seemed to make Vinestar even more furious. "Goldenheart has given birth to Shimmerkit, Moonkit, and Brinekit. They will make fine warriors of ShadowClan."

"Oh yeah?" Vinestar snarled. "Even if they're half-Clan?"

Gasps struck the crowd. Some cats shared glares of bewilderment; while some shuffled away from Goldenheart, giving her vindictive looks. Many came to sit beside her, lifting their muzzle. Fear struck through Thistlepaw. Goldenheart had told him that she had become mates with Jayheart of WindClan, and gave birth to Pigeonpaw, Thistlepaw, and Raccoonpaw. That meant that her new litter had WindClan blood inside of them.

"What gives you the right to spit accusations like that?" Whitestar challenged.

Whitestar gulped as Vinestar shoved past the other two leaders. "Jayheart told me. He told me your Clan's secret. He told me the mate Goldenheart took. WindClan knows these cats must be punished. Therefore we request the kits for us. They don't deserve to be in a reckless Clan like yours."

A growl rose in Thistlepaw's throat. *Of course he wouldn't tell Vinestar the full truth! It was* Jayheart *who was mates with Goldenheart!* Sharpclaw, Thistlepaw noticed, sharing concerned glances with Goldenheart. He then got the feeling there was even more Goldenheart wasn't telling him. His ears pinned to his head, angry that Goldenheart never seemed to tell him anything. Maybe that would change when he became an honored warrior of his Clan.

Lakestar watched in terror as Vinestar neared towards Whitestar. Whitestar's neck fur lifted and his eyes were struck with alarm. "I demand you to give me Goldenheart's litter!" Vinestar demanded.

Thistlepaw unsheathed his claws into the ground. Whitestar took a moment to reply. "No," he finally declared in a defensive tone. "They rightfully belong to ShadowClan. You have no proof that they are half-Clan. We're willing to fight for what is ours."

Vinestar exhibited a villainous chuckle. "Fine then," he murmured. He unsheathed his claws and bared his teeth. Thistlepaw could not believe his vision. He was ready to pounce and fight the grey and brown tabby herself. Robinfeather's protective tail swept over the senior apprentice. *For StarClan's sake, I don't need saving!*

Before Thistlepaw could have any more thoughts, Lightstar and Lakestar had already leapt off the boulder in a cluster of distressed yowls. Vinestar and Whitestar were left alone on the Star Rock. Thistlepaw realized it would only be a few more heartbeats before a brawl evolved.

Minnowpool flicked his ears, nearing closer to the Star Rock. "Stop!" he screeched. Vinestar didn't listen. He launched himself toward Whitestar, his claws barely missing a blow to Whitestar's neck.

Whitestar ducked under the WindClan leader, stunning him by bowling him over. Vinestar cursed furiously, twisting around back onto his paws. Minnowpool was already scurrying up the stone, a determined glimmer in his eyes. Somehow, no blood had been drawn yet. But Thistlepaw thought too soon.

Vinestar sliced his claws across Whitestar's muzzle, hitting his nose. Blood splattered onto the hard rock of the stone. Thistlepaw started

racing toward the foot of the Star Rock. Minnowpool had arrived on top of the boulder, his muzzle lifted firmly. *This could be my chance to defeat a foe!* Robinfeather bit Thistlepaw's tail as he tried to bolt to assist his leader, and the black and brown apprentice let out a yelp of pain. Whitestar sliced Vinestar's shoulder in defense, again knocking him onto his side.

A cloud floated in front of the full moon. Minnowpool skidded in between Vinestar and shouted, "StarClan has spoken!"

The Clan leaders panted, their raging gazes locked. "StarClan can't fight fate," Vinestar snarled. "At dawn we will attack!"

"Stand down," Minnowpool growled. "You've already made your point."

Thistlepaw paused, glancing around the clearing. ThunderClan and RiverClan had fled, and Thistlepaw realized Goldenheart had darted away. *Cowards.* Minnowpool observed Vinestar as he launched off of the Star Rock.

Whitestar looked horror-stricken. He yowled for Thistlepaw and his Clan to follow; and all of the cats bolted out of the clearing. *At dawn we will attack,* Vinestar's words echoed in Thistlepaw's mind. He shuttered. *I must protect Goldenheart's new litter, no matter where they came from.*

// Chapter Five

Spottedpelt's heart twisted with anxiety and uneasiness. The night sky was dragged over the sky with stars dotted over it, shadows enveloping ShadowClan's camp. Spottedpelt couldn't see the moon through her den and she was too nervous to peer out. *Why is it so dark in our camp?* Most of the cats still left around the sandy plain were asleep, but some were awake and alert for the returning cats.

No other cat knew about Vinestar's plan. Spottedpelt had no one to talk to about the Gathering. She nervously shuffled around in her den and fidgeted nervously with her bedding. She anticipated for her fellow Clanmates to return. She felt her heart pound faster.

They have to return soon. Spottedpelt lay her head onto her paw, her ears standing up and attentively listening to every rustle. Every beat of her heart seemed to make her feel more and more uneasy.

Suddenly, the thunder of paws echoed through the clearing, and WindClan cats pelted into the sandy open sky. Spottedpelt felt terror as she noticed a fresh wound on Vinestar's shoulder blade. The other WindClanners had terrified, angry, and aghast expressions.

Other Clan cats were emerging out of their dens, staring at the sandy plot with alarm. Vinestar clamored up the Wind Stone, yowling for a Clan meeting. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here under the Wind Stone!"

Spottedpelt crept up to the edge of the stone, looking up anxiously at her leader. Vinestar quickly glanced at the her, before dismissing her with a roll of his eyes. Spottedpelt wouldn't put it past her leader to ban her from his Clan meetings as well. She prayed he wouldn't; though. She needed to hear what had happened at the Gathering no matter how terrible it may of been. But the urge to turn away and hide in her nest while covering her ears also competed with her feelings of curiosity.

Vinestar's tail lashed with impatience as he waited for his fellow warriors to arrive at the Wind Stone. Spottedpelt could tell that dawn would approach soon, and that Vinestar seemed timed by the soon arrival of it. Willowheart ventured toward the stone, settling herself next to Tigertail as she waited for Brokenpaw to limp over. Brokenpaw arrived, looking with concern at Vinestar's wound. Molepaw, Gingerpaw, Cinnamonpaw, Buzzardpaw, and Tallpaw had all arranged themselves next to each other. The warriors who went to the Gathering stood next to the rock with their eyes widened, neck fur risen, and fur bristling.

"Get your claws ready!" Vinestar yowls. "We are attacking ShadowClan at dawn." At that, Spottedpelt felt her stomach flip over in terror. Shocked mutters buzzed around the open sand moor.

"What?" Copperfrost gasped. Many warriors shared terrified glances with their Clanmates. In the middle of the situation, Jayheart stood with a narrowed-eye expression as he gazed at the gathering of cats.

"Why?" Buzzardpaw demanded. His voice was drowned out by arguing and shocked remarks from the Clan.

"How will we even be able to defeat them, Vinestar?" Fiercetalon asked.

"We should teach them a lesson!" Amberstripe spat. Spottedpelt's hackles rose at her mother's comment.

"What happened out there, Vinestar?" Tansybranch meowed, wide-eyed. She looked sympathetic; ready to comfort any cat who needed it.

"No!" Emberpaw wailed. "We can't attack now!" Fiercetalon quickly padded over, licking the ginger and black furred she-cat's fur tufts along her head. He whispered something in her ear, and she seemed to exhale a breath to try and calm herself down.

"Silence!" Vinestar screeched, interrupting the ocean of murmurs. Jayheart padded up beside him onto the Wind Stone.

"The least you could do is let your leader speak!" Jayheart sneered.

He bowed his head to let Vinestar continue. "Go ahead."

I didn't see you treat him so respectfully earlier, Spottedpelt thought half-scornfully. Vinestar padded to the edge of the Wind Stone. "Whitestar refused to return the half-Clan kits that are rightfully ours," Vinestar announced curtly. "We will punish them for their actions."

Some cats were furious with ShadowClan, while some were standing around with confused gazes and were sharing uneasy glances with their fellow Clanmates. Spottedpelt was struck with horror and was one of the confused cats dotted in the camp. She could already feel the images of battle jolting through her mind. Blood was trickling onto the ground, cats were yowling, fur flung in the air like a storm..

Jayheart blinked and looked up at Vinestar.

"Now," Vinestar continued. "It's time to make battle plans. Webshine, Buzzardpaw, and Littlefoot, invade the pine forest from the ThunderClan border side. Hide in the thickets. Ambush any ShadowClan cats on sight."

The three cats looked terrified; but as Vinestar pointed his tail for them to stand on the side of the Wind Stone they reluctantly padded over to the spot. "Tigertail, Cinnamonpaw, Copperfrost, and Cloverpatch take the WindClan border into ShadowClan territory. Again, ambush any ShadowClan cats on sight," he added. "I, Jayheart, Fiercetalon, Lionrage, Spottedpelt, Amberstripe, and Flakepelt will attack straight to the ShadowClan camp."

Spottedpelt's pupils widened in horror. She needed to confront reality. She would have to fight, even if it was against her will. The sky started growing pale, but there was still time left until dawn. "The rest of WindClan will be left to defend camp," Vinestar declared.

"Get rest while you can," Jayheart ordered gruffly. "It won't be for long."

Disbelief and determination rose in the crowd. Many cats, like

Spottedpelt, could not believe their ears. Spottedpelt felt trapped with terror and fear. She couldn't escape. She couldn't escape the imminent future. Her chest heaved with terror and anxiety; and her heart pounded.

Jayheart leaped off of the Wind Stone. Many WindClan cats wanted to oppose the decision, or at least say a word, but they didn't. Their jaws were kept shut.

Were they right to attack? Spottedpelt didn't truly know. But she followed her gut which immediately responded with: *No!* She looked back to reality. Vinestar had a prideful expression, as if oblivious to his Clan's dismay. Spottedpelt felt disgust roar through her veins. For once she sympathized with Jayheart when he had quarreled with Vinestar. "It bewilders me," Jayheart had spat dryly. "That Logstar had made you deputy."

But Spottedpelt expected Vinestar had manipulated his deputy to believing they were right to threaten at a Gathering and attack. She knew the words her father spoke were full of passion when Vinestar had called the meeting. If he wanted to resist Vinestar, he already would have. He was willing to do whatever it takes to get his way.

Vinestar launched himself off the Wind Stone, padding over to his den. He carelessly swept into it. Cats stared with bulging eyes as the WindClan leader vanished. Spottedpelt scanned the clearing with fear. Miserable thoughts invaded her mind again. She was afraid of battle. She had barely passed her apprentice assessment moons ago, mainly because of the lack of skills she had in battle. Why was *she* chosen to go straight to ShadowClan's camp? Of course, she had received some extra training from her Clanmates, but it never affected her that much.

"No," Sorrelpath breathed as she dragged herself towards the center of the sandy hollow. Her belly was plump and her eyelids were weak. "We can't..." her words were broken off as some warriors gave her looks with narrowed eyes.

"No cat can change his decision," Willowheart meowed grimly. Camp was dead silent.

"Get a grip on yourself, Sorrelpath," Amberstripe sneered, padding muzzle-muzzle to her daughter, her nostrils flaring. "I thought I trained you better, as an apprentice and a daughter." She fixed her attention onto Spottedpelt. She had spotted the terror she was going through. "And you too."

Littlefoot bowed his head. "We must hope for the best," he rasped. "If we win, we'll have three new members of our Clan."

"Who wants a blind and deaf kit?" Jayheart intervened coldly. "Brinekit is practically useless."

"Then we'll target Moonkit and Shimmerkit," suggested Lionrage.

Jayheart grunted in response. He peered at the sky which was growing more pale as dawn advanced closer. "You may as well get rest now," he snorted. "Milling around like helpless mice won't help anything."

Spottedpelt felt guilty about Jayheart's treatment of his Clan. He was her father, yet so bitter. Spottedpelt and Sorrelpath were *nothing* like him. Spottedpelt felt Sorrelpath brush up next to her. "We should get some rest," the sweet tortoiseshell proposed. Spottedpelt looked over at her sister. She felt warmed by her comfort.

"Like we'll even be able to sleep," Spottedpelt murmured.

"You can come and sleep in the nursery if you want," Sorrelpath offered awkwardly. Spottedpelt glanced over at her sibling.

"Just like all those moons ago.." Spottedpelt murmured. She paused a moment. "But Jayheart wouldn't be happy about it."

"Who cares?" Sorrelpath protested in a bit of anger, along with a feeling of playfulness, as if trying to bring Spottedpelt memories from her kithood. Spottedpelt blinked at the other warrior and nodded.

Sorrelpath and Spottedpelt strolled over towards the nursery. The nursery was a large structure of sandstone and dying leaves with a hole gaped in the ceiling. Moss was crumbled up on the ground

inside of the structure. Darkpool looked up with exhausted eyes.

"Still hurting?" Sorrelpath asked, concern flashing over her eyes. Darkpool nodded, clenching her teeth together.

Spottedpelt awkwardly glanced at the blue-grey she-cat and settled down in a clump of moss. She still felt fear crawling up her spine. Even the comforting environment of the nursery couldn't change that. She eventually dozed off after the aroma of milk and sweet-smelling plants put her to sleep.

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Darkness, like a large shadow, tumbled over Spottedpelt's vision. There was nothing she could see in the distance. There was only the soft crunch of grass under her paws and the faint figures of trees. She moved her gaze up, staring at the wasteland ahead of her.

She inched across the large plains; observing everything that surrounded her. *Where am I?* Spottedpelt started bounding across the endless plains, curious to know if it ever ended or emerged into something else.

Something cast shade over her... *a figure.* She turned around, and a dark, shadowy figure was placed above her. It was barely solid throughout the plains. Its eyes were blazing with fury; and its teeth were bared.

Spottedpelt backed up, before realizing more figures were looming around her. The ground under her started to mirror crimson. The outlines' jaws were leaking blood. They whisked over towards Spottedpelt with slobbering jaws.

Spottedpelt let out an alarmed screech, before opening her eyes to the nursery once again. Darkpool was staring at her with droopy eyes, and Sorrelpath grew closer towards her face with an alarmed expression. *W-we have to stop the battle!* Spottedpelt glanced helplessly out into the sandy clearing, where cats were rowling up.

"Are you alright?" Sorrelpath asked.

Spottedpelt didn't answer. She immediately glanced back, fear in

her eyes. The sky was getting flooded by scarlet and apricot colors, with a slight pink shade towards the top. "No.." she gulped. "It's time."

// Chapter Six

Spottedpelt darted ahead, trying to catch up to her bundle of WindClan cats. Vinestar and Jayheart were at the front of the attacking patrol, and Spottedpelt was taking the rear of it. Dawn lights were glimmering in the sky, turning the WindClan cats' pelts blossom.

"Oh, StarClan.." Flakepelt muttered restlessly, his tail dragging limply against the ground.

The WindClan cats were nearing closer to ShadowClan's border; and they were venturing toward the destination from the edge of the grassy, WindClan moor. Vinestar fiercely, yet so nonchalantly plodded up the rolling hills after what he forced his Clan into. Jayheart trailed up beside his leader, containing the same pace and expression of him.

Spottedpelt's fur bristled in uneasiness. *This is it.. there's nothing you can do to can convince any cat to stop this.* Would she die in this battle? The realization came to her that it could be likely. ShadowClan cats had a reputation of being fierce and brutal. But Vinestar seemed almost more aggressive. He was willing to put his Clan in danger for even something quite small. *That element of the story could drive ShadowClan on even more to kill us!*

Spottedpelt could see slight pine tree figures in the distance. Another round of realization split through her. *My Clan could die!* She was falling behind in the group of WindClan cats as she felt fear charge through her.

Calm down, calm down.. Spottedpelt realized she had dug her claws into the ground and all of her fur was bristling with terror. Fiercetalon brushed beside her.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Spottedpelt gulped and stopped the indignant comment *Of course,*

mouse-brain! from escaping her jaws. "Not really," she mewed. "Vinestar is putting us in an unnecessary battle." She felt awkward during the heartbeats it took Fiercetalon to reply. *Should I be more of a fighter? Is it normal to have this over abundance of battle?*

"It's not completely unnecessary," Fiercetalon reasoned. His response made Spottedpelt feel worse and doubt herself even more. "ShadowClan has kits that are rightfully ours. They've been too soft lately."

"Maybe you're right," Spottedpelt lied in sigh, trying to be believable in escaping the conversation. She and Fiercetalon were lurking behind the crowd, and as the two felines stopped their conversation, a resentful hiss came from Spottedpelt's mother.

"Hurry up, you two!" Amberstripe hissed in a whisper. "We're *WindClan,* not those sluggish RiverClan cats across the river. And keep quiet or else ShadowClan may hear us!"

Spottedpelt, for once, felt relieved about her mother's bitter words that let her escape the conversation. She swept passed Fiercetalon, silently blending inside the cluster of WindClan cats. She wondered if none of the cats in the group Vinestar selected for her could empathize with her. *Vinestar purposely chose this group to attack the heart of ShadowClan, didn't he?*

She fell behind in the crowd. Maybe she was wrong about *all* the cats. Feelings of uneasiness was wafted into the air; any cat could scent it. The pine trees no longer felt so far. Spottedpelt felt a new feeling; grim acceptance. She knew there was nothing she could do to stop her leader.

She padded along the glade's edge and gazed deeper into the forest ahead. She realized she could not argue with or escape fate. Maybe the battle would be dangerous; even deadly, but every warrior has to go through it at least once. Grave steps passed the time towards the fray. The sky lit up with the sun's early light. Cats always said morning brought new beginnings, but to Spottedpelt it now brought new endings.

"We're almost there," Vinestar whispered, enough for his cats to

hear him. Spottedpelt could see the pine forest several fox-lengths away. Vinestar glimpsed around at his group of cats. "Fiercetalon and Lionrage, go after Shimmerkit," he ordered. "Amberstripe and Flakepelt, go after Moonkit. And Spottedpelt," he continued. "You're going after Brinekit." *Of course he'd give me the assignment to fetch the blind and deaf kit. Oh well, I never wanted to start this battle. I just want to protect my Clanmates.* "The rest of us will go after the rest of ShadowClan that are in camp."

Jayheart, Lionrage, and Amberstripe nodded to their leader while the rest of patrol looked miserably and nervously at the ground. Vinestar narrowed his eyes to the remainders of his group that didn't nod. "I don't want traitors in my Clan," he meowed coldly. Spottedpelt felt her hackles rise at his message. "Are you in or not?"

A few moments of tension passed. Vinestar stared with his eyes kept narrowed to his patrol. Spottedpelt realized no other cat was responding to their leader; they were waiting for another cat to talk. She felt she was not the only one to feel out of place from her leader's order.

"Y-yes," Spottedpelt stammered. "W-we're in."

"That's what I like to hear," Vinestar responded, but his voice was still full of suspicion.

"Surprising of you to step in," Jayheart purred mockingly. "Daughter."

Vinestar still gazed down at his warriors, as if debating to ask, *what about the rest of you?* But he didn't; realizing how important this battle was to him. He waved his tail and signaled the fighting party off. The group of cats scurried on through the final plots of moor. Short stems of grass was placed under all of their paws, and the rolling plains seemed to come to a halt. The pine trees that had once been small outlines in the distance were a few fox-lengths from touchable.

Spottedpelt felt fear rush through her veins, making her skin crawl closer to her rib cage. She emerged into an overhang of pine trees that stung of ShadowClan. Their scent was even more abundant

than what WindClan set. It burned Spottedpelt's nostrils; making her nose and muzzle wrinkle up in disgust. Pine straw was littered under her paws, along with pine cones occasionally scattered on the ground.

"Stand low," Jayheart whispered. The rest of the cats didn't utter a sound or nod in response; they only abruptly followed his orders, crouching low on the forest floor. Crows called above and crickets started going silent as morning crept on.

Spottedpelt sucked in a hefty breath. *This is happening. Now.* Her heart pounded. She didn't know how any other cat didn't hear it. The pine forest somehow remained silent.

The small shuffle of pawsteps whisked the pine straw. Two figures emerged, one a black pelt with huge ears, another a young, pale-grey apprentice. Spottedpelt searched her mind for the two cat's names. *The apprentice is Duskpaw, and its mentor is Rabbitear.* By her Clanmates tensing up, Spottedpelt came to realization that they were going to attack.

Calm down! You knew this was coming. It's time to face reality. Jayheart sprung out from the shelter behind the tree. Rabbitear veered around in a horrified yowl. The rest of the WindClan warriors stormed out of the shelter.

"It's an invasion!" Rabbitear screeched as claws battered her body.

Duskpaw stumbled back as Rabbitear was being bombarded with WindClan cats. Spottedpelt bounded over towards the young apprentice, unsheathing her claws. Duskpaw's ear pricked, and he pulled himself onto his paws. He lunged onto Spottedpelt's shoulder, nipping at her flesh. Spottedpelt was surprised by his strength, and thrashed around the pine forest in an effort to throw him off.

Duskpaw held on. Spottedpelt was able to grasp his scruff as he latched onto her shoulder, pain snapping through her as she tore him off. Duskpaw went limp as he was being held in Spottedpelt's jaws. Spottedpelt threw Duskpaw onto the ground, and clawed at his shoulder. Duskpaw was jolted back to life; darting under

Spottedpelt's belly.

Spottedpelt felt the apprentice's claws meet her underbelly. She swiftly pinned down his head as he loomed out from under her belly. She nipped at the pale tom's ears, few bits of blood absorbing into her mouth.

Rabbitear sliced her claws across Amberstripe's chest. In retaliation, Lionrage yanked at her tail and clawed her hindquarters. Jayheart swept under her belly and dealt a large blemish under it.

Rabbitear lunged up, launching the WindClan warriors off of her. Blood stained the ground. Rabbitear charged toward Lionrage and Flakepelt, carving scratches across their bodies. She dragged her claws across Lionrage's face, and he let out an ear-splitting wail. Jayheart, fuming, darted towards the three clashing cats. Flakepelt also seemed alarmed, and he pounced on top of Rabbitear.

Rabbitear hissed in fury, jabbing her snout into Flakepelt's rib cage. She was doing a decent job fending the white warrior off, but suddenly more claws pierced her back. She had to let go of Flakepelt, swerving around. Jayheart was ripping at the flesh on her back legs, while Vinestar swooped over and landed on her back.

Duskpaw staggered away from Spottedpelt's grip, lurching around her and jerking over. He crashed into Spottedpelt's flank, almost toppling the she-cat off of her paws. A black and brown tom flashed in Spottedpelt's vision. The figure launched himself at the young apprentice.

Fiercetalon! Spottedpelt felt relief surge through her. She lifted herself up, bolting over and nipping at Duskpaw's neck. He twisted around, and Spottedpelt felt his claws meet her side. She cringed in pain as blood welled up from the wound. Fiercetalon snatched the apprentice away, clawing at its muzzle. Spottedpelt a bit of terror rush through her as she saw Duskpaw's bloody state. She would let him go if needed, but Fiercetalon was not backing down.

Duskpaw let out a cry of agony as Fiercetalon raked his claws down his spine. He lifted his head up and wrestled with the reckless WindClan warrior. Spottedpelt forced herself to join in, breaking up

the clashing ball of fur and sinking her claws into Duskpaw's underbelly.

Rabbitear fell back in a row of defiant howls. She twisted around and nipped at Jayheart's pelt. Vinestar then snatched the warrior by the scruff, and Rabbitear twisted around in the large leader's hold. As she struggled around, Jayheart dragged his claws across her flank.

Amberstripe pulled at the warrior's tail. Spottedpelt turned to glance back and was horrified at what she saw. Rabbitear was coated with deep wounds and her pelt was crimson with her own blood. Duskpaw was going to leap on Spottedpelt while she was distracted as he escaped from Fiercetalon's grip, but froze in terror as he saw the state his mentor was in.

Fiercetalon ascended toward Duskpaw as Spottedpelt stared in a daze.

"Stop!" Spottedpelt shouted. "Don't kill her! It's against the warrior code!"

Vinestar ignored the other WindClan warrior's voice. Spottedpelt spotted a roll of his eyes and was stricken with terror and helplessness. *ShadowClan would never forgive WindClan if they killed a warrior of their Clan! The two Clans would be in an endless battle. And not to mention, killing another warrior in battle is against the warrior code! Who knows how StarClan will punish us? Oh, this will* never *lead to anything good! StarClan help us!*

Vinestar nodded to Jayheart, and tore Rabbitear from the other WindClan cats' grip. He sunk his teeth into the ShadowClan warrior's throat. Rabbitear fell to the ground, but seemed to still be alive. She tried to sit up, before Vinestar shoved her over. Vinestar fastened his claws into the dying warrior's chest, pinning her down until the life was sucked out of her.

Spottedpelt felt horror slam into her. She never imagined her warriors as ruthless as they were. *He didn't have to do that! S-she wouldn't of killed him!*

Spottedpelt heard a breathless screech from behind her. Her father stood beside Duskpaw who had a deep cut in his neck with a blood-soaked paw. Spottedpelt felt woozy with terror. Duskpaw coughed up drops of blood before his body went still.

"Y-you killed them?" Flakepelt glanced back at Vinestar, the fur along his spine rising as he backed up from the scene.

// Chapter Seven

Thistlepaw felt panic and fury charge through him. Dawn was approaching. WindClan would be storming into their camp any heartbeat. The ShadowClan camp was churning with fear and uneasiness. Mosspelt was darting around camp, transporting variants of herbs towards her den ready for the injured. Warriors were being sent on patrols to defend the borders from WindClan.

"Rabbitear doesn't know about the attack!" Mousefang yowled. "She took Duskpaw out during the Gathering!"

"What?" Sparrowfeather gasped. "We need to get a rescue patrol to fetch them!"

"We can't waste warriors," Eaglefeather growled in response. Thistlepaw's neck fur bristled as camp became an endless quarrel.

"We're not wasting warriors!" Mousefang hissed. "Rabbitear and Duskpaw need to be brought back to camp!"

"Why is Pinewhisker sending out border patrols?" Weedtail inquired. "We need to keep all warriors in camp!"

"If we send out patrols we might be able to flank the warriors that come in," Robinfeather suggested. "They're likely trying to ambush us."

Thistlepaw narrowed his eyes. *Useless! Stop mewling around like newborn kits and prepare for battle, mouse-brains!* He dashed around camp. He heard many warriors giving him alarmed calls, but he ignored them. He had one objective. *Win this war.*

Thistlepaw bounded towards the corner of camp. *Where in StarClan is Goldenheart?* He peered inside the warriors den. It was empty. He glimpsed inside of the apprentice's den. It was also empty, except for a small leak in the ceiling. *We're fixing to be in battle! The least you can do is actually help.*

He neared towards the nursery, glancing inside. He saw his mother fearfully shuffling the moss and directing her kits into small hiding spots. *Of course! She's in the nursery.* Thistlepaw padded inside. Maplekit was trembling with terror. "WindClan is going to attack!" he squealed. His brother, Shadekit, trailed up beside him. Bluekit, Stormkit, Smokekit, and Rainkit cowered in a corner.

Shimmerkit and Brinekit squealed in distress. Their eyes were still shut. But Thistlepaw noticed something even more peculiar. *Where is Moonkit?*

"Goldenheart!" Thistlepaw demanded. Goldenheart winced in surprise and turned her head to face Thistlepaw. "Where is Moonkit?"

Goldenheart froze and her eyes lit up in fear. Thistlepaw lashed his tail in fury for his sister. "Well?"

"S-she drowned," Goldenheart eventually squeaked. Thistlepaw felt his heart lurch. "She opened her eyes before her siblings and heard about the coming battle. She searched for the river in panic to escape, and she was swept away.."

Moonkit's dead? Thistlepaw felt sorrow blast through him. He sucked in a breath, and a slight suspicion struck his mind. *How could she of opened her eyes so early? And walk?* He shook his head. *No! I can't believe her. No cat would. That's a mouse-brained story!*

Thistlepaw struggled to convince himself that Goldenheart was lying, but his gut told him she was. There were many things Goldenheart had toiled to keep secret from Thistlepaw, but it had eventually become uncovered. *Like her prior relationship with Jayheart.* Goldenheart had fallen in love with Jayheart, the deputy of WindClan. They had given birth to Thistlepaw, Pigeonpaw, and Raccoonpaw. Goldenheart claimed it was Eaglefeather's kits, and surprisingly, Eaglefeather seemed thrilled. But it seemed there was a bigger secret Goldenheart tried to hide, but it was finally revealed. She had, again, become mates with a cat from another Clan. Every cat seemed to know it, but had no response due to the upcoming turmoil.

Thistlepaw jumped out of his daze. *Battle. Battle. Battle.* The words repeated in his head, until he got back into his defensive notion. *Right. Protect the camp.* Thistlepaw nodded in response to Goldenheart, forcing himself to have a sorrowful look in his eyes. *I shouldn't mourn until I know the whole story.*

Cats were filing around camp, stifling panicked meows. The sky was lighting up with colorful lights of dawn.

"Defend the nursery!" Whitestar ordered.

An incoherent yowling invaded the air. Dusttail and Raggedjaw bolted into camp with horrified and miserable looks. Cats turned their heads and looked in confusion and shock.

"They're coming!" Dusttail screeched. "WindClan is coming!"

Cats' eyes widened in terror. Dusttail and Raggedjaw heaved themselves into the camp. "Rabbitear and Duskpaw are dead!" Raggedjaw yowled, tears bubbling up on his eyelids. "They were ambushed!"

Distressed cries filled the camp. Thistlepaw's hackles bristled. *Dead?* He realized WindClan wasn't just trying to teach ShadowClan a lesson; they were going for the death blow. Whitestar was now alarmed. He raced around camp, assigning cats to guard the nursery.

"This is all your fault, Whitestar!" Weedtail hissed bitterly. "Goldenheart deserves punishment!"

Whitestar didn't respond; he was too busy darting around camp. Mousefang and Dusttail were hauling large branches to create a blockade in front of the elders' den. Treeflight, Greywing, and Splashpaw were still on patrol. *And they may not return.* Camp was a bundle of chaos as ShadowClan warriors were stumbling around in fear. *Look at us! How is this even ShadowClan?*

Then, Thistlepaw heard it. The pounding of WindClan warriors' paws filled his ears. They brushed past the trees in a herd of furious howls. ShadowClan cats were turning their heads and charging

towards the attackers. Thistlepaw recognized Vinestar, Jayheart, Amberstripe, Spottedpelt, Flakepelt, Lionrage, and Fiercetalon. He arched his back in a pounce and hurled himself through the air.

"Thistlepaw!" Squirrelchase called firmly in alarm. "Come here!"

Thistlepaw ignored his mentor and fastened his claws into a spotted WindClan warrior's back. He was jolted back, but held on as hard as he could. Thistlepaw recognized the cat as Spottedpelt. He nipped at the young she-cat's ear, clawing fervidly at its face.

"Pathetic!" Thistlepaw huffed as he dodged a blow from the spotted she-cat. "You can't even beat an apprentice."

Spottedpelt's fur prickled in anger. She darted past Thistlepaw with great speed and ducked under his belly. She ripped her claws at underbelly, making Thistlepaw flinch in pain. Thistlepaw went limp, trying to crush the WindClan warrior. Spottedpelt launched herself out from under the ShadowClan apprentice before she could be impacted by the fall.

Thistlepaw bared his teeth and his fur bristled. Spottedpelt paced around him, waiting for him to make a move. Thistlepaw exercised his neck muscles.

Thistlepaw made a mighty leap towards the sleek she-cat. As Spottedpelt was about to claw at his flank, Thistlepaw veered out of the way and seized his opponent's muzzle. Thistlepaw nipped at the she-cat's nose, twisting around and landing on her back. He sank her claws into Spottedpelt's spine, slicing the exposed skin.

Spottedpelt spat in fury, rolling over. Thistlepaw felt his whiskers twitch in alarm. He sprung off of the WindClan warrior, tumbling onto the ground with an awkward fall. Spottedpelt staggered onto her paws and bolted over towards the brown and black tom.

Thistlepaw hauled himself onto four legs. He felt blood trickling off of his spine and onto the ground. His muscles ached in weariness, but he forced himself on. He would never let any cat see any weakness from him. Furious battle cries echoed around him as he latched onto Spottedpelt's shoulder. *Are we winning?*

Spottedpelt twisted her neck around in a snarl. She thrashed around as Thistlepaw clawed at her flesh. *Mange-pelt! Go back to your own camp!*

Thistlepaw felt satisfied as Spottedpelt cried in pain. He held onto the she-cat's pelt, gnawing at her spine. Heartbeats passed. Suddenly, Thistlepaw felt jaws meet his back leg. They wrenched him off of the WindClan warrior with great strength and determination. Thistlepaw whisked around to see Flakepelt. He was able to wriggle out of his grasp, dashing another direction before glancing behind his shoulder.

Flakepelt was stampeding towards Thistlepaw, his eyes illuminated with pride. Thistlepaw coiled his lips back to bare his teeth, a growl forming in his throat. *Of course, you have to outnumber me.* He darted towards the white warrior that opposed him, aiming for its neck. Flakepelt dodged his blow, slamming into Thistlepaw's side.

Thistlepaw spat in anger, jerking around and launching himself towards the reinforcement. He slashed the warrior across its back, bouncing to his other side and nipping at his pelt. Flakepelt then slipped under the brown and black apprentice and clutched his back leg in her jaws.

Thistlepaw was hurled into the air and landed awkwardly on his side. He fumed with rage and shuffled onto his paws. Flakepelt fixed his claws into his back. Thistlepaw thrusted himself back, crushing his attacker from under him. Flakepelt didn't react much because of Thistlepaw's slightly smaller size. He shoved the apprentice off.

Thistlepaw stumbled back onto his paws. Spottedpelt bounded back over, digging her claws into the ShadowClan apprentice's neck fur. Thistlepaw writhed around and kicked his hind legs into the warrior's flank. He scrambled back, only to feel another set of teeth wrap around his scruff.

Thistlepaw was torn away from the other two WindClan warriors. He gazed up to see Jayheart. *Traitor!* Thistlepaw thrashed his body around. Jayheart strengthened his grip as he bounded away from the brawl.

Thistlepaw heard a loud screech from Goldenheart. *I'm fine! You're supposed to be protecting your own kits, mouse-brain!* Thistlepaw slashed his claws across Jayheart's nose, and he trembled back in pain. His paw went warm with blood, and he escaped the WindClan deputy's clutch. He crashed against the ground; dust clouding her eyes. Goldenheart pinned Jayheart down, staring down furiously with her eyes blazing.

Thistlepaw hauled herself onto her paws, the blood roaring through his ears. The fray was far from over. As Goldenheart gazed in rage towards her former mate, Vinestar's broad body flashed into Thistlepaw's vision. Vinestar revolted against Goldenheart, tearing her away from Jayheart.

Thistlepaw bounded toward the WindClan leader, clawing at his shoulder. Vinestar seemed unaffected and threw the apprentice back. Thistlepaw dipped under the broad tabby's belly, drawing blood from under it. He escaped before he could be crushed, racing past Vinestar's jaws.

"Thistlepaw, stop!" Goldenheart ordered. Jayheart started to dart toward the nursery, and in a reluctant heartbeat, Goldenheart dashed toward him in rage.

Thistlepaw ignored his mother's call. He aimed for Vinestar's muzzle, dealing a successful blow. Vinestar's weight then pummeled him back. Thistlepaw stumbled back before springing towards the grey tabby tom again. He aimed for its neck, ready to rake his claws across it to deal a harmful blow. Before she could, another hiss rung behind him.

Flakepelt had returned, dragging his claws down Thistlepaw's back. Thistlepaw let out a yowl of agony, contorting his head around. He boosted herself off of Vinestar's wide shoulders, clawing at the senior warrior's chest. Flakepelt swung around, slashing his claws across Thistlepaw's face.

An excruciating screech of pain split the air. Thistlepaw recognized the sound coming from the nursery. *Goldenheart!*

Thistlepaw used a mighty amount of strength, carving blemishes

around Flakepelt's body. He let out a cry of pain, and Thistlepaw was let free. Thistlepaw ignored his pain and weariness and bolted for the nursery. His heart pounded; almost out of his chest.

Thistlepaw then froze in terror.

// Chapter Eight

Goldenheart's eyes were filled with anger. The slain body of Jayheart lay in front of her paws, a scarlet pool oozing from his neck. Thistlepaw's eyes widened and his fur bristled. He peered deeper in the scene, fear and reluctance gushing through his veins.

Misery shot through Thistlepaw. Brinekit was limp, his head turned towards the nursery with his jaws still separated.

"No!" Thistlepaw hollered. *Why him? What did Brinekit ever do wrong?* Time felt slow. Thistlepaw crept up towards his dead brother, touching noses with him. Goldenheart padded up next to him.

StarClan could've prevented this, but they didn't. Why should I trust them? They let our Clanmates die at the claws of WindClan.

Goldenheart's fur bristled. Tears were building inside of her eyes, but she tried to resist them. "This battle isn't over yet," Goldenheart meowed, her voice shaking with the agony she tried to hold back. Thistlepaw lifted his gaze. *She's right.*

Anger burned in Thistlepaw's veins. Jayheart may of died, but that wasn't enough. Thistlepaw thirsted for vengeance. *WindClan will pay for what they have done.* He silently picked himself up onto aching paws, shifting his head over to look at the barrier of the nursery. He emerged out of it, heaving breaths in anger.

Vinestar was fighting Squirrelchase and Spottedpelt was fighting Weedtail and Raccoonpaw. Thistlepaw then spotted Flakepelt, who was darting towards him, determination glowing in his eyes. Thistlepaw curled his lips back in a furious hiss, unsheathing his claws into the earth and waiting with fury blazing in his gaze.

Thistlepaw heard the pounding of Flakepelt's paws approaching. He lifted her gaze with full determination and astringency towards the white warrior. Flakepelt saw Thistlepaw as being distracted, and

made a duck for Thistlepaw's legs.

As Flakepelt was about to skid under Thistlepaw, he burst out with anger. Thistlepaw hurled Flakepelt away with great force. Flakepelt hit the ground in a furious hiss. As he was exposed, Thistlepaw swept his claws across his neck. Flakepelt let out an agonizing yowl. His body quickly fell into the dirt and he went completely still. It was that easy.

Thistlepaw sat for a moment, his heart pounding. Anger blazed through his blood. He was proud he punished WindClan for her brother's death; but he still didn't feel achieved. Duskpaw and Rabbitear had been murdered by the WindClan warriors. His own brother had been slain. But something else seemed missing in Thistlepaw. He narrowed his eyes. There was still something he needed to know more about. But the adrenaline lowered. ShadowClan won.

"WindClan, retreat!" Vinestar screeched, disgusted.

ShadowClan warriors with blood trickling down their pelts watched with fury as the attacking WindClan warriors limped out of their camp. Vinestar gave the ShadowClan warriors a vengeful look before turning away and storming out of camp.

Mosspelt slid out of the medicine den, marigold leaves and horsetail locked in her jaws. A line formed beside the medicine den, at the front of it was Raccoonpaw. He had a long scratch along his back, a ripped shoulder, and a torn ear. But he didn't seem to mind. He panted tiredly, but his eyes still showed strength and courage. Eaglefeather waited behind him, dealing a quick lick to Racoonpaw's head and nodding reassuringly.

"You fought well," Eaglefeather rasped to the striped tom. "Those WindClan flea-pelts will think harder before they attack us again." *If only Squirrelchase gave me that much attention.* Slight envy roused in Thistlepaw.

The black and brown apprentice then recalled Brinekit once again. He shot a guilty glance towards the nursery. He also remembered Moonkit, who was in a pool of great mystery. The Clan believed

Goldenheart's explanation, but Thistlepaw doubted it. He didn't know what to believe from his mother anymore, and part of him was too stubborn to accept a dreadful truth. Goldenheart then padded up beside Thistlepaw. A few silent heartbeats passed as the two ShadowClan cats shared glances that spoke for themselves.

"I know there's more you're not telling me," Thistlepaw growled, eliminating the silence. He glimpsed at Goldenheart with an interrogating look. "Who is my real father?" The flashback of Goldenheart excitedly telling the Clan about Eaglefeather's second litter coming into his mind, and Eaglefeather smiling with thrill.

Goldenheart hesitated. She swept her tail across Thistlepaw's spine fur, pointing it towards an area out of camp. "Follow me," she replied. "I'll tell you."

Thistlepaw narrowed his eyes and followed his mother. Sadness gnawed at him as he gave into his thoughts of Brinekit. That part was real. That wasn't a faux; it wasn't a tale that Goldenheart placed in the air to hide reality. *He couldn't of ever experienced the world like you could. Maybe StarClan let this happen to put him out of his misery.* Thistlepaw gave a quick glance to the morning sky, where the moon faintly shone. He prayed Brinekit would be given all of his senses in StarClan.

Goldenheart led Thistlepaw to a small opening between two pine trees that were threaded with vines and a bramble screen, and soon, Thistlepaw shook his head of stray thoughts. The gap wasn't far out of camp; it was only a few fox-lengths from the nursery. However, the bramble curtain made it so their words to be hidden.

Goldenheart settled down in a nest of bracken. Thistlepaw arranged himself across from her, unable to find a comfortable position with his great apprehension taking over his senses.

"Well?" Thistlepaw inquired, his tail twitching.

"Eaglefeather is not your father," Goldenheart, after many heartbeats of being irresolute, admitted. She seemed to be exhibiting a guilty glance to the ground. *Obviously. But there must be more you're hiding. I heard Vinestar's announcement.* "I met this cat

across the river. His name is Sharpclaw. We fell in love and I was carrying his kits. I said they were Eaglefeather's second litter, but no-"

Thistlepaw didn't react. "Is Moonkit really dead?" he interrupted, sounding like he already knew the answer. But he felt it might just be a pang of false hope.

Goldenheart's fur bristled. "No. I gave her to RiverClan," she huffed.

Thistlepaw let out a puff of relief, but he was still quite angered his sister's strength wouldn't be given to ShadowClan. And now Brinekit was dead. Not all of his questions were answered, though. "Tell me the story of what happened to SkyClan."

Goldenheart's hackles lifted in fear. *It's about SkyClan, isn't it? My vision probably was about them. It's about what Goldenheart's hiding.*

"Well," Goldenheart started after a deep breath. Her muscles tensed. "The Clans weren't used to having to share territory with a fifth Clan that was placed in the middle of their territories. They had lived as four Clans for so long a while ago, they just found it too much to handle. They didn't want SkyClan to end up banished again, so they ordered them to spread into the Clans. The Clans threatened with battle. Some SkyClan cats accepted the deal, but some didn't. The ones who didn't were killed. I couldn't believe the Clans had fallen so blinded."

"Is that all?" Thistlepaw demanded.

"Well, the territory was given to the four Clans to share," Goldenheart responded, her voice growing a bit of fear that finally showed.

"What else?" Thistlepaw hissed, his voice cold. He would not give up until his mother told the truth. Goldenheart's fur bristled and her eyes seemed to flash in fear. "I've felt this connection since I was a kit with SkyClan. I-I've seen visions. Something is up. You were alive then. What happened?"

"W-well," Goldenheart stuttered, her gaze not fully meeting

Thistlepaw's. "It was like any other day. What was special, however, was it was the night of the Gathering. Vinestar and other leaders gave the proposal to SkyClan that they split into the other Clans. RiverClan was the most sympathetic and accepting to SkyClan; they were even willing to take elders. Some SkyClan members accepted the deal, but many declined the other Clans' offer. Vinestar led the attack on the SkyClan residents that refused. Many cats died that day..."

Thistlepaw knew there was more. "Tell the truth!" he screeched, his voice condescending. His tail lashed. Goldenheart seemed to have reached a point of terror. She looked as if she was about to bolt off in fear as she started to back up, glancing around for a way to escape. Her ears started falling back onto her head in fear. Thistlepaw's eyes blazed. "Tell me!"

"You were on the SkyClan battlefield," Goldenheart blurted, her voice shaking and her tone fearful and reluctant. "I couldn't let you die."

Thistlepaw's ears fell flat onto his head. The flames that scorched inside of his eyes intensified. "You lied!" he roared. "You lied all my life! And not only that, you let SkyClan die! You killed my home Clan! It doesn't matter if you saved me, you still caused a Clan to be slaughtered!"

Goldenheart stumbled back even further. *You're afraid of me.* Thistlepaw gazed angrily at the golden she-cat. "As long as I'm alive," Thistlepaw started to vow, his voice threaded with fury and determination. "I will bring SkyClan back. I don't care what lengths it will take."

Thistlepaw turned his back to Goldenheart and started to pad off. He knew the golden she-cat meant well; but, it was hard to convince himself that. *The Clans deserve to be punished. They drove out SkyClan once, and they left them astray again. Soon, SkyClan will be superior and will punish the Clans for what they have done. My home Clan shall return.*

// Chapter Nine

A voice rung in Dawnpaw's ears. She blinked open her eyelids, gaping her jaws in a yawn. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Quarterstone!" a voice announced. Dawnpaw recognized the voice as her leader, Lakestar. He stood on the Quarterstone, the early dawn light shining on his pelt.

She stretched out her legs, lifting up her head to glance outside. She saw many cats had frightened expressions pasted on their faces. *What's going on?* She emerged out of the apprentices' den, a large structure with a stone half on one side and a half with logs and undergrowth.

A wave of shock splashed over Dawnpaw as she saw her sister, Yarrowpaw. Yarrowpaw had fresh wounds chiseled over her body with a bitter poultice stuck on them. There was an especially nasty wound Dawnpaw caught on Yarrowpaw's chest.

Dawnpaw felt her mother's scent waft into her nose and immediately surveyed her with questions. "What happened to Yarrowpaw? Is she okay? Did the medicine cat tend to her wounds?"

Rosefern glanced down at her daughter, blinking in realization at who it was. "Apparently, rogues had attacked the camp," Rosefern meowed, her tone threaded with concern. "Yarrowpaw was the first victim. Thank StarClan none of the wounds were infected. I'm still worried, though.."

Dawnpaw's eyes reflected in fear. *Rogues? Attacking ThunderClan?* She was about to ask her mother more questions, before Lakestar's call echoed around camp once again. Hazelpaw, Silverpaw, and Duskpaw were arranged towards the back of the cluster of cats, Sunflower emerged out of the warriors' den along with Sleekfur and Toadpuddle, and Eaglecloud was the last to arrive.

Dawnpaw darted over towards Yarrowpaw, her eyes gleaming with

concern. "Are you okay?" she whispered.

"Still stings," Yarrowpaw meowed through clenched teeth. "But I'm alright."

Dawnpaw fixed her gaze on the faded ginger she-cat. She was about to ask her more questions, but Lakestar had started to speak. *I want to become a great warrior. But it is much more dangerous than I ever imagined as a kit.*

"Rogues are in the forest," Lakestar alerted the Clan hastily. "They have attacked. We must defeat them and defend ourselves."

Alarmed and anxious meows rung in Dawnpaw's ears. *I hope my Clanmates will be able to defeat the rogues. I feel bad I probably won't be able to help. Lakestar apprenticed me to Wolfspirit only a few sunrises ago.*

"How many were there?" Thornbranch asked anxiously.

"Two," Lakestar responded. "We should be able to fend them off." Dawnpaw glanced over to Yarrowpaw once again. *Two rogues did* that *much damage?*

ThunderClan cats exchanged anxious glimpses, Dawnpaw among them. Lakestar twitched his tail around, examining the cats around the clearing. "Sootbreeze, Sleekfur, and Volefoot," Lakestar declared. "You will drive away the rogues." *You aren't even going to help?*

The designated warriors were nudged out of the crowd. Their expressions were reluctant and fearful. Dawnpaw gulped. She had never been so intimidated by her leader. *Life as an apprentice is so much different than being a kit.*

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Yarrowpaw was sunning herself in the dawning clearing. Dawnpaw wanted to stroll over to join her sister, but anticipation held her down. *Where are the warriors?* She expanded her pupils and glanced around, searching for any sign of the ThunderClanners. But there was no sign of them.

Owlpaw and Pricklepaw were tumbling over each other in a pretend battle while Silverpaw and Duskpaw were having a climbing competition on the nursery. Dawnpaw spotted Sunflower, their mother, stomping over in an angry pursuit. "Duskpaw and Silverpaw!" Sunflower scolded. "You are *apprentices*, not kits. Get down from there."

Wasptail and Snailface were chatting beside the elders' den with Ratfang and Weaselface nervously glancing around camp. Dawnpaw finally shifted her eyeballs to peer into Lakestar's den. Lakestar was calmly snoozing in his nest. Dawnpaw felt hot with anger. *While Sootbreeze, Sleekfur, and Volefoot could be being torn apart as if they were crow-food, you sit here and sleep!*

Dawnpaw tried to reduce her rage, once again looking at Yarrowpaw. Her expression radiated with concern at the faded ginger she-cat's wounds. *How in StarClan can more cats not be concerned with her?* Maybe they were, but they were just keeping it to themselves. That's what Dawnpaw hoped. She and others had always been anxious and concerned when her Clanmates are injured. Why should Yarrowpaw be any different?

Suddenly, a fierce yowling convulsed Dawnpaw from her thoughts. She craned her head around, staring in terror. Sootbreeze and Volefoot were limping into the barrier, their blood dripping onto the ground. Lakestar had already bolted out of his den, staring in fear and despair. Dawnpaw noticed one major difference from when Sootbreeze and Volefoot had been sent out. Sleekfur had vanished.

"What has happened?" Lakestar gasped. He seemed to have been trying to keep his voice cool, but ultimately failed.

As Sootbreeze was trembling in terror, Volefoot stepped ahead of him. "As we followed the rogues' scent trail, we eventually found them," Volefoot explained, his voice quivering profusely. "There were five rogues, not two. They had a taste for blood on their faces. Before we could run, the pack of rogues bombarded us with blows. We barely escaped, but they would not let Sleekfur go. We had to leave him." Volefoot stumbled back, looking half in shock.

Dawnpaw was struck with horror. *Five rogues?* She felt like they

would never escape the grip the rogues had on them. She started to panic. *How many warriors will we lose for this battle?*

Lakestar took a step back, strengthening his voice again. "Then we shall send five of our warriors to fight," he declared as more cats were cruising out of their dens. "The rest will guard camp." Dawnpaw felt a vision occupy her mind. Five ThunderClan cats; she couldn't tell who but she recognized their scent; were laying on the ground in a pool of blood. She shook her head and tumbled out of her vision in fear.

"Weaselface, Wolfspirit, Ratfang," Lakestar started, his voice laced with thoughtfulness. "And Dawnpaw and Yarrowpaw." Dawnpaw felt her heart lurch. Had she heard Lakestar right? *Me? No!*

Dawnpaw scurried up beside Rosefern in fear. Rosefern shouted, "No! Dawnpaw and Yarrowpaw are too young!" Her eyes illuminated in terror. Other ThunderClan cats were gasping in shock and nervously chattering among themselves.

Lakestar opened his mouth to retort, before he was interrupted by Eaglecloud. "Lakestar, this is out of hand!" Eaglecloud meowed firmly, raising his voice through the chatters of the crowd. "You cannot send these apprentices to battle, it has been merely a quarter moon since they were assigned their new ranks!"

Lakestar narrowed his eyes. His tail started to twitch in anger. "I have declared that Dawnpaw and Yarrowpaw are going to battle. My word is the warrior code. I believe these apprentices have made great progress," he growled stubbornly.

Dawnpaw stood in the middle of the crowd, her fur bristling in fear. *StarClan, no! Me and my sister can't go to battle!* "I have more power over you," Eaglecloud responded coldly.

Dawnpaw was afraid Lakestar would turn rogue and rip Eaglecloud to shreds. Lakestar's tail was lashing. "StarClan has more power over me," he retorted, broadening his shoulders as if asserting his dominance over his Clan. "I don't see them denying this decision."

ThunderClan exhibited snorts of disgust. Dawnpaw came to the

realization that there was nothing she could do to stop her relentless leader. *Lakestar isn't even coming to help! Is he that selfish?*

Cats shared horrified glances with each other. Yarrowpaw brushed past Dawnpaw, drowning in her gaze with concern and empathy.

"We'll get through this, sister," Dawnpaw promised. "I swear." Her voice then turned to a bit of playfulness. "I would be leader, and I would make you my deputy. We would order Duskpaw and Silverpaw to fetch us fresh-kill and clean the elder's ticks off for us."

Yarrowpaw exhibited a false chuckle. She stood silently in the clearing as the attacking patrol was arranging. Dawnpaw nuzzled against her.

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Uneasiness wafted through the air. The attacking patrol shuffled through the undergrowth. They all had anxious expressions on their faces. The rogues' scent trail stung Dawnpaw's nostrils. She felt her heart lurch in fear. *Oh, StarClan, I don't want to die.*

Yarrowpaw crept beside Dawnpaw, taking the rear of the patrol. Dawnpaw wanted to spew all of her thoughts at her sister, but she wouldn't dare. The rogues would hear them.

Wolfspirit was at the front of patrol. He halted at different intervals, dipping down to sniff the trail of the rogues' scent. He lifted his head back up, glancing around before continuing. The cluster of cats were surrounded by large oaks that hid their presence, and bramble thickets were placed around almost every crater beside the trees. Mice were scuffing around in their dens, taking precautions about the felines a few tail-lengths away from them.

The revolting stench of rogues seized Dawnpaw's nose. She wrinkled her muzzle up in disgust. The scent drowned every bush and erased every drop of ThunderClan scent. Dawnpaw's heart lurched. She was nearing into the rogues' camp.

An ear-splitting screech echoed through the air. It cried in agony. *Sleekfur!* Dawnpaw twisted around and dashed ahead. Yarrowpaw

shuffled behind Dawnpaw.

Sleekfur was limp and still. Dawnpaw froze in horror. A ginger rogue stood beside their body, narrowing her eyes. Sleekfur's eyelids were closed, and his body was battered with wounds. *He's with StarClan now.*. Dawnpaw felt fear scramble through her. The rogues were not to be messed with. Why would Lakestar send two new apprentices to battle when three full-grown warriors couldn't even defeat them?

The rogues then turned their heads and set their angry gazes on the attacking patrol. Dawnpaw's fur bristled in fear. She unsheathed her claws into the ground. Wolfspirit padded towards the pack, his eyes reflecting with fury.

"How dare you mess with ThunderClan?" Wolfspirit snarled.

"Because we can," a black she-cat sneered. Dawnpaw's ear tufts bristled.

"While we're starving," a silver tom growled. "You are happily gulping down fresh-kill. It's time you see how we feel."

Ratfang's tail lashed. Weaselface padded next to Wolfspirit, unsheathing his claws.

"We will fight for what is rightfully ours," Wolfspirit hissed. He glanced behind his shoulder at the cats who waited anxiously behind him. "ThunderClan, attack!"

Dawnpaw launched herself at the ginger she-cat, fixing her claws into her lower back. She was immediately jerked back, letting out a screech of fury. Cats were clashing all around her. She could hear nothing else. She felt helpless as the scrawny she-cat drove her claws down her spine.

Dawnpaw slashed feebly at the body that crashed into her. She was hurled back onto the ground. Pain zapped through her body, but she continued on. She pulled herself onto her paws, her eyes glistening with determination. She lunged back at the ginger tabby she-cat, this time dipping under her.

She slashed her claws across underbelly, before feeling weight collapsing onto her body. She cried in agony, eventually slipping out from the she-cat's grip. The ginger tabby she-cat carved her claws down Dawnpaw's back. Dawnpaw jolted back, kicking frantically at the she-cat.

The ginger tabby winced in pain, hissing, "Is that all you've got?"

Dawpaw felt a pang of satisfaction. She bounded back up to the she-cat, sinking her teeth into its neck. The ginger tabby thrusted back in a row of violent snarls. Dawnpaw let out a screech of surprise and felt claws rake down her flank. Her eyes became a haze of teeth and claws.

Dawnpaw couldn't glance anywhere else than her attacker. She couldn't be caught off her complete guard, or else she may be threatened with death. She gashed the ginger tabby's chest, before she was thrown onto the earth. Dust flew into her eyes and nostrils.

Dawnpaw was about to haul herself up, before a deafening yowl rung in her ears. She recognized it as her sister. She whisked around. A fluffy, large black and ginger tortoiseshell tom was pinning Yarrowpaw to the ground. Yarrowpaw's eyes were droopy from blood loss, and she was soon going to be unconscious.

"Hold on!" Dawnpaw yowled. She felt teeth meet her tail, and whipped around and sliced the ginger tabby's nose. The ginger tabby stumbled back in a painful screech and gave up her hold on the grey apprentice.

Dawnpaw dashed towards her sister's aid like a bolt of lightning, adrenaline flowing through her veins. She heaved herself into the air in a broad pounce. She fastened her claws into the immense tom, slamming into him and knocking him off of his paws.

Dawnpaw felt a wave of relief knowing Yarrowpaw was free, but it was overwhelmed with fear. The broad tabby pinned Dawnpaw down with massive force. Dawnpaw wanted to scream for help. *Yarrowpaw, please live.*

Dawnpaw went limp and felt teeth sink into her throat. She felt the

tom let his grip off of her. She was dying. She couldn't move and felt stiff. She tried to heave breaths into her lungs, but eventually couldn't. *I'm joining StarClan...*

Dawnpaw went still. She was dead.

// Chapter Ten

Spottedpelt was sprawled out on the floor of camp. Her father was dead. She felt grief, even though Jayheart was never very kind to her. Jayheart was still her father. Spottedpelt knew the battle would not lead to anything good, but she was still sorrowful about the WindClan warriors who were killed. She remembered Flakepelt, who actually sympathized with her. She wanted revenge on ShadowClan, but at the same time, it was WindClan's fault.

Spottedpelt was confused on how to feel. She could sympathize with ShadowClan. *But Goldenheart had kits with a half-Clan cat! She should be punished!* Spottedpelt knew WindClan had unnecessarily killed warriors and even a kit when Goldenheart was the only one at fault. Was her Clan truly that brutal?

WindClan cats were cautiously strolling around camp. Many had wounds sliced over their body with poultices stuck onto them. Few patrols had gone out the rest of the day, only making sure ShadowClan wouldn't retaliate and attack them back or to hunt. The patrols sent out were only cats that were mildly wounded or defended camp, as the rest were too weak.

Spottedpelt lifted her head to notice Vinestar ambling out of his den with narrowed eyes and a cross look on his face. Willowheart trailed behind the robust WindClan leader with a satisfied look.

Vinestar climbed on top of the Wind Stone. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Wind Stone," he grumbled, barely enough for the cats of WindClan to hear. *It's time for him to choose a new deputy,* Spottedpelt realized.

According to the warrior code, a new deputy after the death or retirement of the previous one, must be selected before Moonhigh. *And Vinestar obeys that part of the warrior code after he's broken it by killing Rabbitear,* Spottedpelt thought bitterly.

Littlefoot, Fiercetalon, Buzzardpaw, and Lionrage limped over

towards the back of the gathering cats. Spottedpelt arranged herself in the middle, surrounded by Sorrelpath and Darkpool. Tigertail and Tansybranch sat right behind Spottedpelt, and Amberstripe in front. Amberstripe rose her shoulders and lifted her chin in pride, as if she already knew she was being chosen for the deputy role.

Vinestar waited for the last of the warriors to settle in front of the Wind Stone. Cinnamonpaw, Gingerpaw, and Brokenpaw arrived last. They glanced up patiently at the WindClan leader.

"We will mourn Jayheart for moons to come," Vinestar started. "He was a great deputy, and served our Clan well. But we must choose a new deputy." *It didn't feel that way to me.*.

Vinestar gave an irritated glance to his medicine cat with his eyes narrowed. Willowheart responded with an incoherent hiss. Vinestar rolled his eyes. "May StarClan approve my choice," he muttered. "Our medicine cat has *insisted* that a certain cat should become deputy..."

Spottedpelt felt her fur bristle. She shifted her pupils over to look at Willowheart. *So that's what she was arguing with Vinestar about. But who?* Amberstripe narrowed her eyes in confusion and lowered her muzzle. Spottedpelt felt a great feeling of doubt come from Amberstripe.

Bewildered chatters zigzagged through the crowd. Every cat exhibited curious glances toward another. Spottedpelt felt a few gazes absorb into her for a few heartbeats before they travelled on. *Vinestar seems pretty indignant to his medicine cat's choice. It can't be Amberstripe.*

Willowheart fiddled her paws in the grass, staring restlessly at Vinestar. The broad WindClan leader formed a growl in his throat. Spottedpelt's fur bristled in uneasiness. Cats were abruptly going stiff around her. Amberstripe lowered her chin at the ground. Her whiskers were twitching resentfully.

"The new deputy will be," Vinestar growled in incensed. He paused to think his choice through. "Spottedpelt."

Spottedpelt froze. *Me?* Cats were giving her puzzled glances. *Why in the name of StarClan would Willowheart want* me *deputy?* Spottedpelt didn't speak a word. Willowheart had a satisfied look on her face.

Amberstripe was drowned in fury. She unsheathed her claws deep into the ground. She shot a sour glance to Spottedpelt. Her eyes were scorching with livid emotions. Spottedpelt backed up in an intimidated pace as her mother's blistering gaze nipped at her pelt. *Why are you scared of your own mother?*

"Why would he choose *you* as deputy?" Amberstripe sneered quietly to Spottedpelt. "You hardly know anything about leading a Clan."

Spottedpelt's pelt bristled. She gaped her jaws, but nothing came out of them. *Why* would *he choose me on deputy? Or, why would Willowheart want me deputy? It doesn't make sense! I'm not a good fighter, and I can hardly make any decisions myself! And to make me the future leader?*

Spottedpelt felt something nudge her. She let out a squeak of shock. She turned her head to find Sorrelpath emerging into her vision, who was exhibiting a *mrrow* of amusement.

"Stupid furball!" Sorrelpath joked playfully. "You're deputy now! Aren't you going to do something other than just standing there?"

"I-I," Spottedpelt stammered. She sucked in a breath, straightened her tail and limbs, and cleared her throat. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess. I'll start by assigning a patrol." She then puffed out her chest, looking playful.

"Just because you're deputy doesn't mean you have to try and act professional around me," Sorrelpath meowed. "We're still sisters."

"I know," Spottedpelt started to admit. "But after this battle, after I was banned from the Gathering.. It's just a bit much. And now I'm deputy. I can't understand how in StarClan Willowheart would insist for *me* to be the future leader of WindClan."

Sorrelpath's whiskers quivered. "I'm sure she has her reasons," she theorized.

"But why wouldn't she of told me?" Spottedpelt queried.

Sorrelpath took a few heartbeats to reply. "I don't know," she admitted in a sigh. Her tail curled over to point at Vinestar's den. "But you should probably get to assigning that patrol before Vinestar rips your pelt off."

Spottedpelt nodded. *Sorrelpath's right.* Her heart still pounded in shock. She tried to block the same questions that flooded her mind. *Why would Willowheart choose me? Will I be able to succeed Vinestar's leader role and run the Clan well?* Spottedpelt strolled over to the center of camp, raising her muzzle.

WindClan cats fixed their curious gazes onto the sleek she-cat. Spottedpelt examined the varieties of felines that were placed into the clearing. *Fiercetalon?* She glanced over at the black tom. *No. He's too wounded.* She felt a pang of guilt for not being able to do more during the battle. What if Vinestar was purposely trying to show her weakness and mistakes to make her resign as deputy? She shook her thoughts out of her head. She surveyed the whole camp, before formatting her choices inside of her mind.

"Emberpaw," Spottedpelt started. "Tansybranch, and Molepaw, please go on a hunting patrol. Try the moors on the far, back side of camp. There may be some rabbits hunting around there and mice in the holes."

"But I just went on patrol!" Emberpaw protested.

"Our wounded need fresh-kill to regain our energy," Fiercetalon, Emberpaw's mentor, meowed sternly. "Follow Spottedpelt's orders."

"Fine," Emberpaw retorted.

Vinestar started traipsing out of his den. Spottedpelt's ears pricked. "Oh, Vinestar! Can you join the hunting patrol?" she asked. Her voice had grown more awkward as she continued her sentence. "Er, if you don't mind.."

Vinestar rolled his eyes and grunted in response. He indignantly dragged himself over towards the bundle of cats, his eartips

bristling. "It won't be long until you cause me to regret my choice even more," he snarled quietly to Spottedpelt. Spottedpelt winced at his remark. The insult felt like a thorn had pricked her.

Spottedpelt watched uneasily as the patrol started strolling out of camp. She felt uncomfortable by Vinestar's resentment and treatment of her. She felt relieved as he went out of sight and was out of influence of her. She scrutinized the clearing to see if anyone needed her help. Maybe she should join the patrol she set. But what if someone needed her help? The leader was out on patrol, too. She finally decided she would stay.

Brokenpaw was trembling over the ground with a stick topped with mouse bile lodged in her jaws, nearing towards the elders' den. Willowheart was following with wild garlic locked in her jaws. Cinnamonpaw and Buzzardpaw were nervously chatting with each other, while Gingerpaw and Tallpaw were dragging branches that previously blockaded the elders' den to the edge of the sandy clearing. Darkpool was being guided to the nursery by Sorrelpath, who had a mouse hanging from her jaws.

Spottedpelt reluctantly followed her sister. She felt awkward strolling around while trying to keep her chin high in her new position of authority. She trailed behind her sister and Darkpool.

"Thanks," Darkpool gasped as she arranged herself on a bed of moss and Sorrelpath placed a mouse at her feet.

"Er, hi," Spottedpelt addressed, curling her tail. "Camp seems to be doing well; even after the battle."

Sorrelpath nodded in response. "You can see if Willowheart needs any help," she suggested. "I bet she's busy tending to WindClan's wounds."

"Well, I think she and her apprentice are taking care of the elders' ticks," Spottedpelt responded, turning to quickly gaze outside.

"You could fetch me some poppy seeds," Darkpool grunted through clenched teeth. Spottedpelt dipped her head as Sorrelpath padded over to comfort the other queen.

I never imagined I would ever be deputy. Spottedpelt's uncertain thoughts started soaring through her mind again. *Do I deserve to be deputy? Did StarClan want this? What if I lead my Clan into an unnecessary battle? What if-*

Spottedpelt bumped into a muscular ginger tom. She let out an alarmed *mrrow*. She recognized the tom as Lionrage.

"Watch your step!" Lionrage hissed. "Mouse-brain. Why in StarClan would Vinestar of chosen you?"

Spottedpelt felt like her fur was being groomed the wrong way. She felt embarrassment snap through her. "Sorry!" she meowed, before darting towards the medicine den. She heard a spiteful grunt come from the large tom as she rushed away.

The medicine den was a immense structure of logs on the top with beds of moss. There was two stone gaps in the ground, one with a lower cleft with more moss nests, another a large store of herbs layered in multiple slots. At the mouth of the den there was a broad collection of logs and a protective bramble screen. Tendrils of thistles hung down from the large beech log overhang.

Spottedpelt ducked under the tendril screen. She spotted Brokenpaw washing her paws in a puddle of water in the herb storage. Brokenpaw's ear twitched, and she twisted her head around. She blinked at WindClan's deputy.

"Oh, It's you," Brokenpaw sighed. She hauled herself onto three paws, struggling over to the main plot of the den. "Yes?"

"May I have some poppy seeds?" Spottedpelt asked. She signaled her tail to point towards the nursery. "They're for Darkpool."

"Sure," Brokenpaw responded, seeming joyful to assist the deputy. She crouched down and emerged back into the herb storage. She shot glances around the store, rummaging around the plants and other mixtures. Her expression changed to a bit of relief as she was able to grasp two poppy seeds in her jaws. She toiled out of the store after grabbing some beech leaves. She placed the beech leaves on the floor, then placed the poppy seeds into the mixture.

"Here," Brokenpaw meowed, prodding the mixture towards Spottedpelt. "Two should make her comfortable enough to sleep."

Spottedpelt dipped her head in gratefulness. "Thanks," she meowed, before lowering her head and grasping the herbs in her jaws. She escaped from under the thistle tendrils once again, darting towards the nursery.

Spottedpelt appeared through the mouth of the nursery. Darkpool lifted her head and gazed at WindClan's deputy with relief. Sorrelpath was at her side.

"Here," Spottedpelt murmured, gently setting down the herbs. "You should be able to fall asleep easier."

Darkpool muttered a thanks as she swallowed the poppy seeds. Suddenly, a violent screeching split through Spottedpelt's ears. She dashed out of the nursery with an alarmed yell as moonlight flooded the camp. She saw Emberpaw and Molepaw dashing nervously next to Tansybranch, who had Vinestar leaning on her shoulder. Vinestar had fresh wounds chiseled on his pelt with blood welling up from them, and so did the rest of the patrol.

"What happened?" Spottedpelt inquired, her tone laced with shock and concern. Molepaw shot a bitter glance at the leopard-like she-cat.

"We were attacked by d-dogs," Emberpaw squeaked.

"Vinestar lost a life," Tansybranch added shakily. Spottedpelt was struck with horror. *I sent them out to the moor! This is my fault!*

"You probably planned this," Molepaw snarled. "Didn't you?"

Spottedpelt went stiff with terror. "No!" she gasped. "Of course not! We need to take him to Willowheart's den!" *It is my fault, though... isn't it?*

Spottedpelt watched as the three cats urgently guided the WindClan leader towards the medicine den. She felt afraid. She wanted to wail out loud: *StarClan, why? Why me? I obviously don't have what it takes!*

// Chapter Eleven

Thistlepaw curled his lips back in a hiss. His back was arched, and his fur bristled. His mentor was standing a few tail-lengths away from him, watching intently and waiting for his move. *I need to prove to him how strong I am,* Thistlepaw mused. *However, I don't think this would be a real foe.*

The sun peered over the horizon, barely affecting the two figures that were hidden by broad pine trees. Thistlepaw and Squirrelchase had selected a secluded clearing to battle train; one that young apprentices were too afraid to enter. *That should keep them from bothering me.*

Squirrelchase launched himself off of a rock, propelling himself into the air. Thistlepaw readied himself, straightening his forepaws. He felt an array of battle moves surge through his mind. *Not enough time for that, mouse-brain!* Thistlepaw made an awkward skid towards the other side of the earth as Squirrelchase landed at his old spot.

Thistlepaw veered around, hearing a violent sneer coming from his mentor. He darted another way again, before whisking around and slamming into Squirrelchase. He ducked under his flank as he hastily started going limp to crush him. He slipped out from under his flailing paws, bouncing over a stone.

He launched herself back at her mentor, gripping his shoulders with sheathed claws. He nipped at Squirrelchase's neck, before getting jerked back with mighty force. He stumbled back. His mentor's jaws neared toward him with a daring grip.

Thistlepaw thrusted his hind legs up, stunning his mentor for a heartbeat. He scrambled onto his paws in a swift moment, before hurling himself into the air and going for Squirrelchase's upper body. He fastened her teeth into his head and nipped at his ears.

Thistlepaw was lurched back by the dark ginger tom. He was

thrown onto the ground, letting out a snort of contempt. *Fox dung!* He heard his mentor's paws thundering against the soil. He twisted around onto all four paws. He felt her wounds from the battle a quarter-moon ago sting. *Come on. Get yourself together, for StarClan's sake.*

Squirrelchase's paws met Thistlepaw's pelt. Thistlepaw, in a furious hiss, jolted his muzzle into his mentor's chest, freeing himself from his grasp. He battered him with sheathed claws on the shoulder, before tumbling into two cyclones of fur. He and his mentor started wrestling fiercely all over the clearing.

Thistlepaw felt frustrated. *With our claws sheathed, me and Squirrelchase are fighting like dopey kits!* He aimed at flashes of dark ginger fur, but was only hitting feebly and uselessly. He felt anger shoot through him. He bit at her mentor's shoulder blade, digging deep into the flesh. *Maybe you should hold off on the prey.*

Squirrelchase let out an agonized hiss. He thrusted himself into Thistlepaw's body with great force, almost using all of his strength. Thistlepaw was confused. He then felt the sticky substance of blood on his paws. *I unsheathed my claws!* Squirrelchase rammed his hind legs into Thistlepaw's flank to get out of his hold.

"Fox-brain!" Squirrelchase spat coldly. "What in StarClan do you think you're doing?"

"I'm tired of fighting like dopey kits!" Thistlepaw hissed, his claws still fresh with his mentor's blood. "ShadowClan should be fierce and strong again." *And SkyClan should be stronger.*

"I'm starting to think you'll never understand the way of Clan life," Squirrelchase growled firmly. "It's not all about vengeance and battle satisfaction."

"I'm the only one that *can* understand Clan life!" Thistlepaw sneered. "Your mouse-brained interpretation of the forest is leading us to our demise. Even Whitestar's interpretation.."

"You should respect those who are older and more experienced than you," Squirrelchase chided. His eyes blazed with anger towards his

apprentice.

Thistlepaw's tail lashed. He kept her claws unsheathed, and stuck them into the ground. "Oh really?" he snarled bitterly. "What do the elders do? They sit around all day and do *nothing* but complain about ticks and how hunting patrols 'never come in time'. At least kits have potential!"

Squirrelchase's breathing heaved heavily with fury. He suppressed a growl that rose in his throat, and his eyes scorched like fire. "Come on," he scolded in an angry tone. "I'm taking you back to camp."

Thistlepaw was nudged by his mentor. A disgruntled hiss escaped his jaws. He moved away from where his pelt no longer met her mentor's, walking indignantly beside him. *Why can't* any *cat understand me?* He padded into further landscapes of pine forest that amplified before her.

Thistlepaw wanted to race ahead, but he felt the disapproving gaze of his mentor melting into his skin. He was guided past the obstacles of pine trees, and Squirrelchase's tail was touching his ear in protection of him lashing out. *Wow.. you really think I'm going to tear you to shreds, do you? Well, you're not completely wrong. I* want *to, but I can't.*

Thistlepaw made a jump over a bush, followed by an attentive Squirrelchase. He sighed indignantly, crossing over a small log that acted as a bridge that stretched over a miniature puddle. He heard an antagonized hiss from his mentor as he almost continued on without him.

"Don't think you can escape," Squirrelchase snapped. Thistlepaw rolled his eyes and snorted.

The sound of other felines approached. Thistlepaw veered his head around to see Thrushwing, Dusttail, and Leopardpaw padding over the undergrowth. They noticed Squirrelchase's cold gaze and Thistlepaw's hostile expression. Thistlepaw's muzzle wrinkled up followed by a snarl.

"What's going on?" Dusttail inquired. Her body stung of mingled

scents from marking the borders.

Squirrelchase narrowed his eyes. He twitched his tail to Thistlepaw's shoulder, meowing in a bitter and low voice, "This apprentice thought it would be a good idea to unsheathe his claws during a training battle."

Leopardpaw's eyes widened and she shifted her green gaze over to stare at Thistlepaw. Thistlepaw's fur bristled. "It's not a big deal," Thistlepaw growled. "It's not hurting anyone."

"Oh really?" Squirrelchase retorted, turning around to show a fresh wound on his shoulder blade. Leopardpaw's jaws gaped.

"How dare you?" Leopardpaw hissed.

Thrushwing placed his tail in front of the spotted she-cat with a firm look. "No," he requested firmly, a pang of fear laced in his voice. "We'll let the cats at camp take care of them. We need to finish our patrol."

Leopardpaw exhibited a sour hiss. Thistlepaw responded in a snort of contempt. *Mange-pelt. You'd better move before I tear all of your whiskers off.* He shoved past Leopardpaw as ShadowClan scent started flooding his nostrils. He and his mentor must've been growing close to camp.

Thistlepaw blinked. The entrance to camp was placed a few tail-lengths away from him. *Oh, no.* He resented what punishment he would have. *I guess it wouldn't be completely dreadful if Whitestar delayed me becoming a warrior; I need time to be recognized. I need cats to follow me. However, fellow ShadowClan warriors may not like me for my actions.*

"Come on," Squirrelchase directed in a hiss. Thistlepaw gave him an indignant look, before sliding through the barrier to camp. Greywing, Eaglefeather, and Raggedjaw were sliding beside Thistlepaw and his mentor, giving them bewildered looks as they saw their expressions. Treeflight was chatting with Pinewhisker, before glancing over at the approaching warriors.

"We need to speak to Whitestar," Squirrelchase insisted in a hasty manner. Treeflight blinked, confusion in her expression.

"Er, okay," Pinewhisker responded awkwardly. He signaled his tail towards the leader's den, a small crevice planted next to the Branching Elm. "He's in- what in StarClan happened?" Pinewhisker had froze, staring at the fresh wound lodged on Squirrelchase's shoulder.

Squirrelchase glimpsed at Thistlepaw. Thistlepaw felt his pelt prick with humiliation. "This apprentice thought it would be a good idea to unsheathe his claws during battle," Squirrelchase snarled. *You're trying to get me in trouble, aren't you?* Thistlepaw let his ears fall flat on his head in a furious hiss.

Pinewhisker's neck fur rose, and he glanced down at Thistlepaw. He seemed intimidated by the young apprentice. Treeflight was brave enough to step beside the deputy. "That was not wise at all, Thistlepaw," Treeflight rasped sternly. "I expect you not to do it again."

Thistlepaw wanted to let out a "Yeah, right. You aren't in charge of me." But he decided against it. He snorted in unison, hit with a skeptical look as Treeflight's response. Squirrelchase brushed his tail across his nose, trying to gain his attention.

What now, flea-pelt? I'm right here. "Follow me, *now*," Squirrelchase demanded, as if Thistlepaw wasn't obeying him in the first place. Thistlepaw debated if he should oblige his mentor's request. Why should he? Squirrelchase didn't seem to care a mouse-length if he were to get in trouble.

"I said, *NOW*!" Squirrelchase screeched, alerting the whole camp. *What in all the Clans' name are you doing?* ShadowClan cats stuck their heads out of their dens and scurried over towards the scene in a bewildered mess. Thistlepaw felt his whole pelt go hot as cats' sweltering gazes massacred all else he could think about.

"What's all this commotion about?" Heavycloud snapped hoarsely. His tail was twitching in an irritated manner as muffled messages from warriors around him built up. He narrowed his eyes and

slightly tilted his head as he saw Squirrelchase's smoldering optics.

At this point as cats were arranging around Thistlepaw's mentor, it was as if he was holding his own Clan meeting. "My apprentice decided-" Squirrelchase started, before being abruptly cut off by Whitestar.

"What's going on here?" Whitestar intervened firmly. He shoved inside of the crowd, scanning around to find Squirrelchase and Thistlepaw at the core of it. "Squirrelchase? Thistlepaw?"

"Whitestar," Squirrelchase meowed respectfully, dipping his head. "I need to talk to you. It's urgent."

Whitestar squinted his eyes. "Did it, by a chance, attract this plethora of cats?" he mocked. "How come you've shared whatever you need to talk to me about with all of the Clan? To get attention?" Thistlepaw felt a pang of satisfaction run up his spine.

"Uh, well.." Squirrelchase stammered.

"Come on," Whitestar ordered, signalling his tail toward his den. Squirrelchase darted over, followed by a sauntering Thistlepaw. Thistlepaw ducked his head, padding inside of the crevice that wielded the ShadowClan leader's den. Thistlepaw puffed out his chest and tried to perch confidently on the ground.

Squirrelchase glanced around hastily. A few heartbeats of silence ran by. Thistlepaw waited for conversation to start. Whitestar lowered his gaze, acknowledging the black and brown apprentice. Squirrelchase was granting her a resentful glance.

"We went out for battle train today," Squirrelchase informed the ShadowClan leader. "As we were doing a practice fight, Thistlepaw decided to unsheathe her claws. He drew blood from my shoulder. I believe his ambitions may be dangerous." Thistlepaw's fur bristled at his mentor's choice of wording. *Dangerous.*

Whitestar narrowed his eyes. He shifted his pupils over to Thistlepaw. His expression was kept calm, but they were clouded with a bit of fear and fury. "Is this true?"

Thistlepaw debated in his mind if he should lie. But it was too late. He had already given the ShadowClan leader a slight nod. *Sparrow-brain! Now you're going to get in more trouble!* Thistlepaw couldn't imagine a good ending to being punished. Was she mouse-brained? Being punished could give her more time, but was overall a hassle.

Thistlepaw gaped his jaws to try and tell why he should be able to unsheathe his claws, but all of the words he tried to blurt out were caught in her throat. He waited restlessly for his leader's response. His whiskers quivered and his tail started to twitch.

"Thistlepaw," Whitestar meowed firmly. "If you cannot learn the ways of the Clan, I don't think I should make you a warrior anytime soon." The comment the ShadowClan leader made stung Thistlepaw like a rat's bite.

Thistlepaw wanted to protest. But it was his own leader talking. "Yes sir," Thistlepaw gulped after being strictly nudged by his mentor. *But we're ShadowClan... we're supposed to be the fiercest Clan in the territories!*

"As for you," Whitestar continued, raising his head to meet gazes with Squirrelchase. "You do what else you think is necessary for punishment. But I don't want you starting a rally up inside camp again. You understand?"

Squirrelchase bowed his head. "As you say, sir," he meowed respectfully. *You will all be proud of me one day. I will have defeated a great foe, and my ideas will no longer be produced from a puny apprentice.*

Thistlepaw exited Whitestar's den in a swift pace, trying to escape from his mentor. It felt as if a cat that had once been pinning him down was thrusted away as he emerged away from his mentor's sight.

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"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Branching Elm!" Whitestar's call rang. Thistlepaw grunted and rose his head out of his nest. *What does he want now?* He hauled

herself onto four paws, blinking as the last rays of the sun pierced his eyes.

It seemed the cats of the Clan had already been assembling in front of the Branching Elm. Whitestar unsheathed his claws on one of the limbs of the tree that stemmed out from the roots of the large elm. Attentive ShadowClan warriors were lifting their chins to meet their leader's gaze.

Thistlepaw shuffled out of the apprentices' den, flanked by Thrushpaw. Clusters of ShadowClan warriors were settled down on multiple rows that lead to the Branching Elm, the elders at the back; the queens a tail-length in front of them; followed by arrangements of apprentices and warriors. Pinewhisker stood at a lower branch of the tree, watching as ShadowClan cats arranged below his paws.

Thistlepaw then shifted his focus over to glimpse at the front of the cluster of cats. Splashpaw was fussing over her mother, Sparrowfeather, who's gentle strokes of the tongue swept over her kit's tufts of fur on top of her head. Splashpaw was wincing back in a, "Mom! I can groom myself." *She's becoming a warrior? She's a half-moon younger than me!* Thistlepaw was disgusted and in disbelief.

Whitestar was looking proudly from where he stood at the senior apprentice. Thistlepaw felt as if Whitestar was making Splashpaw a warrior just to irritate him. And to make things worse, Squirrelchase was signalling Thistlepaw to sit next to him with a flick of his tail. He seemed to be hiding a smug look, but it ultimately shown out of his efforts to hide it.

The humiliated feeling came back to Thistlepaw. Squirrelchase was giving him a front view of Splashpaw upgrading to her new status in the Clan, just to shame him. Thistlepaw was hot with anger. He grudgingly strolled up to the spot his mentor saved for him, lifting his muzzle to reluctantly focus his gaze on the Branching Elm. *That'll be you one day,* Thistlepaw tried to convince himself. *After you defeat a mighty foe.*

"Splashpaw," Whitestar called. "Climb up." Splashpaw nodded, unsheathing her claws and performing a lunge. She grasped the first

branch of the tree, hauling herself up onto another branch. As she went up a quarter of a dozen branches, she turned her head around to glance back down to the ground.

Sparrowfeather had a reluctant and anxious look on her face. Her gaze was darting up and down the tree. *I hope Splashpaw* does *fall off the tree because of the clumsy mouse-brain she is.*

Splashpaw clawed up another branch, exhibiting a *mrrow* of surprise as the limb shook underpaw. Other cats seemed to freeze uneasily as the calico she-cat shambled up the tree. The she-cat hauled herself up two more branches, making marks as she climbed upwards. After tense heartbeats, Splashpaw scrambled a dozen branches to where Whitestar stood.

Whitestar lowered his head, night swarming over the sky. "I say these words below Silverpelt and our ancestors," he spoke, his voice echoing around the clearing. "Splashpaw is courageous and fierce and has trained hard with her mentor Robinfeather." Robinfeather was dipping her head respectfully at the foot of the tree. "Splashpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Splashpaw responded; her voice thrilled.

"Then from this moment on, you shall now be known as Splashfall," Whitestar called. "ShadowClan honors your strength and courage."

Cheers congregated inside of the clearing. "Splashfall! Splashfall!" voices echoed.

Splashfall and Whitestar met noses. Thistlepaw's muzzle wrinkled up in envy. *How dare he?* A growl suppressed inside of Thistlepaw. He felt deafened by the enthusiastic and approving ovations that came from others. *Does this give me more time to defeat a foe, or will ShadowClan just produce more limitations in my path?*

// Chapter Twelve

Wetkit blinked open her eyelids as the morning sun attacked her eyes. She suppressed a playful yawn, wriggling over in her nest. She vigorously prodded her sister, Snowkit, in the neck. Snowkit grunted in response.

"Wetkit?" Snowkit moaned in an irritated tone. She twisted her head around and squinted her eyes open.

"Come on! Maybe Smallpelt will let us out of-" Wetkit started briskly before she felt a set of paws jab her spine. She squealed in surprise, veering around and knocking weight off of her.

"Got you!" Weedkit hissed. "Slow mole!" Wetkit growled in response of her brother's insult. She pounced up and landed on him. Weedkit scowled and exhibited a squeak of surprise, contorting around in a wrestling bundle of fur.

Paws battered Wetkit's pelt. She jerked around, aiming for Weedkit's flank. She felt energy dart through her. *I have to prove to Snowkit that I can defeat Weedkit!* As she was about to deal a well-aimed blow to Weedkit, she felt his paws pin down her head. She hurled a cluster of kicks towards her brother, feeling satisfied as he lost his grip.

Wetkit realized it wasn't all her doing. Smallpelt was hauling Weedkit back by the scruff, a bothered look cemented on her face. She gently set down the tom, hissing, "I'm a mouse if Lightstar would make you all apprentices when you come of age with this behavior."

"Sorry," Wetkit moaned. She didn't take any more heartbeats to ask, "Can we go outside of the nursery?"

"Please?" Snowkit chirped, not giving Smallpelt enough time to reply. She scurried up in front of her mother, a pleading look on her expression.

"Not right now," Smallpelt finally responded. Her three kits drooped their ears and their expressions emerged into a pout. Wetkit grunted angrily. *Why not? She can't keep us confined to the nursery forever!*

Wetkit peered outside of the structure of knitted leaves and tree limbs. She saw a blue-grey tom gulping down a fish. Other RiverClan cats were travelling out of camp, some being appointed for going on patrols. She suddenly felt teeth bite on her tail.

"We're not allowed to go out!" Snowkit insisted. Wetkit turned back to her with an annoyed look.

"I'm not!" Wetkit hissed. "I'm just looking." Smallpelt's eyes were narrowed, and she kept supervision on the two kits. Weedkit was creating a small structure of leaves and twigs out of boredom.

"Ugh," Weedkit moaned, knocking down his structure with his tail. "Mom, why can't we go outside?"

"I don't want you all being rambunctious outside," Smallpelt meowed in response. "You need to prove to me you can behave. If not, then you'll have to stay here." *Seriously? Ugh! Why can't you just let us take one pawstep outside?*

Smallpelt curled into her nest. Weedkit arranged himself next to his mother, shutting his eyes as a purr formed in his throat. Wetkit lashed her tail. *You all are no fun!* She watched indignantly as the nursery became silent.

"Hey, Wetkit," Snowkit whispered. "I have a dare for you."

Wetkit pricked her ears. "What is it?" she asked ambitiously.

"I dare you," Snowkit started in a rebellious tone. "To go to Sharpclaw's den..." *This sounds like a challenge already.* "And put a thorn in his nest." Wetkit blinked at her. *But if Smallpelt found out, she would probably burn my pelt off with lectures about "obeying the rules." Well, I suppose better than staying here all day.*

"I accept!" Wetkit squealed. "But you have to come with me."

Snowkit hesitated. She blinked at her sister. "But I dared you!" she

protested. *Hmm. I don't want to make her think I won't take a challenge. I am not a whiny kit! And I'm going to prove to my littermates how clever and strong I am.*

"Fine!" Wetkit squeaked proudly. "I'll do it myself."

Snowkit nudged a claw-like thorn towards her sister. Wetkit glimpsed down at it. *How come I haven't been considering how Sharpclaw will rip my pelt off?* She dipped her head down, ready to fasten the thorn in her jaws. But then she realized, *wait, how will I get permission to leave the nursery?* She kicked the thorn behind her to make sure Smallpelt could not see it.

"Mother," Wetkit called. "May I go to the Dirtplace?" Smallpelt peered open her eyes to stare at the grey she-kit.

Smallpelt yawned and meowed, "Alright." She paused as Wetkit turned away. "But take Sagepaw with you."

Ugh. Wetkit felt irritation prick through her pelt. *Yeah, no.* She grunted a "yes" in response, quickly lowering her head and grasping the thorn in her jaws behind a small collection of leftover moss. She darted out of the nursery. She heard a small chuckle come from her sister before the voices from the structure became incoherent.

Wetkit strolled across the clearing of camp, keeping her thorn harnessed between her teeth but hidden by her lips. Foxfang blinked at her in a bit of confusion that she was out by herself. The rest of camp didn't seem to pay much attention to the light grey and white she-kit.

Wetkit shuffled across the grass, trying not to reveal the thorn that sat inside of her jaws. *Wow,* she mused incredulously. *Camp is amazing!* She had rarely ever exited the nursery due to Smallpelt's rules. She gaped at the RiverClan camp's broad setting. Sharkpaw and Spikepaw were racing across the clearing with Sagepaw taking the rear. Starlingflame and Troutstream were giving them bothered looks as they bolted across the clearing.

"For StarClan's sake, you three!" Poppywish hissed, her tone threaded with irritation. "You're not kits. And you're going to trip

someone!"

Sharkpaw skidded to a halt, followed by Sagepaw and Spikepaw. "Sorry," Sharkpaw muttered. She dashed over towards the apprentices den, followed by the other two she-cats. Wetkit blinked at them, before glancing back to the nursery. Snowkit was giving her a daring look and a strong nod.

Wetkit grunted in response. She felt a pang of regret surge through her. *What if Smallpelt found out?* She shook the thoughts out of her head. *No. Don't think about that. You accepted the dare!* She ambled up, trying to act casual, further towards the elders' den. She felt extremely small compared to the other cats around camp.

Wetkit found herself falling into day dreams. She imagined being a powerful RiverClan warrior. She imagined soaring through battle, pridefully defeating the members of other Clans around her. She formed an image in her mind of herself raising her own kits. She felt a deluge of vigorous energy shoot through her. *I'm going to be the best warrior RiverClan will ever see!*

Ack! Wetkit rammed into a large light brown figure. She stammered back, hearing a growl coming from the other tom. "What's this?" he hissed.

Lightstar! Wetkit felt herself get washed with embarrassment as she recognized the light brown, white, and ginger tom's coat. Wetkit separated her jaws to speak. She felt her thorn tumble off of her tongue and land on the grass. *Mouse dung!*

"Come on," Lightstar ordered, nudging Wetkit ahead. Wetkit refused to move.

"No!" Wetkit squealed. *You're not my father!*

Lightstar murmured something under his breath before hauling Wetkit up by the scruff. Wetkit wriggled around, forming an effort to leave. She realized she was being led to the nursery. Snowkit put on an alarmed expression and watched as Wetkit was transported closer to her.

Lightstar set down Wetkit on a bed of moss. Smallpelt immediately sat up, gazing down at the grey she-kit with a fuming expression. Wetkit knew she was in trouble.

"Well," Lightstar sighed. "Guess what she did this time."

Lightstar seemed to have muttered it to himself, as he immediately continued. "She exited the nursery-I'm guessing without your permission- with a thorn in her jaws. She was headed towards the elders' den."

Lightstar didn't need to say anymore. Smallpelt was already furious. *Fox dung. I'm doomed.* "Snowkit dared me!" Wetkit screeched, causing Snowkit's ears to flick in alarm. "She dared me to put a thorn in Sharpclaw's nest!"

Smallpelt narrowed her optics. She held her gaze at the two kits for a few heartbeats. "You two are not allowed to leave the nursery for a quarter moon unless you go with a warrior," she growled. "Any more of this behavior and it'll be for a moon."

Wetkit's ears went flat on her head. *I can't last one more moment in here!* She grunted and fell back into her nest. The last thing she heard before she fell asleep was Lightstar's meow of, "I expect that you will not let this happen again, Smallpelt."

// Chapter Thirteen

Spottedpelt crouched low on the ground, fixing her gaze on a vole that scurried around in a patch of ferns. She lunged using the energy from her haunches and soared through the air for a heartbeat, before killing the vole with a swift bite to the back of the neck.

She had been sent on a hunting patrol; and Vinestar had said Tigertail would catch up with her after he is finished with his border patrol. Spottedpelt dragged the vole a few tail-lengths away and buried it under soil. She then sniffed around in search for prey.

She let scents in the air waft into her nostrils. There was the stale scent trail of dogs that led up to a twoleg den. Spottedpelt's fur bristled. *Were those the dogs that took a life from Vinestar?* She had sensed great reluctance among her Clanmates after Vinestar lost a life from the dogs. She had sent the patrol up to the back of the moor where the vicious creatures apparently lurked. Members of WindClan repeatedly blame her. *Should I be the one to judge? I still don't understand why I would be deputy.*

The scurrying of tiny legs knocked the golden she-cat out of her musing, where she lifted her head and pricked her ears. *Mouse!* She lowered her body to the ground, feeling the soft stems of grass brushing her underbelly.

Spottedpelt made a swift leap, peering open her jaws, ready to bite down on her prey's neck. The mouse suppressed an alarmed trill, dashing across the moor in a panic as Spottedpelt landed awkwardly on the ground. *Mouse dung!* The spotted she-cat stammered onto her paws, watching with narrowed eyes. *It's lucky for this much prey to be scurrying around this much in WindClan,* she came to the conclusion of in her mind. *Greenleaf isn't going to last long. But here I am, wasting prey that has been given.*

Doubt clouded Spottedpelt's mind again. She was not a great fighter; was she not going to be able to sustain enough food for her Clan, too? She shook her head, lifting her muzzle to let scents flow

into her nose. She hoped for a hare, but there seemed to be little signs of the fresh scent. She scavenged around, dipping her head to check under rocks for any dens of prey animals where their scent thrived.

She strolled further through the rolling expanse, nearing towards the side of their territory flooded with sand. She trekked further, only to feel a strange scent that ebbed into her nose. It had a tang of sweetness to it; but the scent seemed a bit stale.

Spottedpelt kept low to the ground, following the scent. Her eyes widened. *Catmint!* A small, stone overhang held a trampled supply of catmint. Spottedpelt's heart sunk. The purple stems were shriveling up and were maliciously and purposely trampled over. *Who would do this?*

She sniffed around for any scent. The catmint's scent seemed to obliterate the others, but the fragrances around it were drowned with WindClan. *It seems no other Clan did this. But maybe I was just too late.*

Spottedpelt lowered her head and shuffled along the stalks. She tore a dead stem out of the ground, digging past the ones that were shriveled in a murky violet shade up to search for more. She stuck her nose inside. Her heart started to pound. *Does this mean we won't have any supply for greencough?*

As the dappled she-cat was still prowling around the catmint store, the soft scuffing of other paws against grass filled her ears. Another WindClan scent cascaded into her nostrils, followed by a gasp.

Spottedpelt veered around in a bit of confusion. Tigertail watched with a horrified expression, as if he just caught the spotted she-cat in a murder. The limber she-cat then realized it looked like *she* had ravaged the stalks. Her heart surged with terror. *No! Please, I can't be blamed for something else!* A feeling of helplessness sunk into her stomach.

Tigertail broadened his shoulders and rose his muzzle. For a heartbeat, to Spottedpelt's imagining, he looked like a spitting image of Vinestar. "What do we have here?" Tigertail inquired, his

eyes blazing.

A lump arranged in Spottedpelt's throat. She didn't know how to answer. "I-I found it already l-like this," she stammered. Tigertail's tail lashed.

"Come on," Tigertail hissed in a sour tone. "I'm taking you to Vinestar."

Tigertail set his tail firmly on Spottedpelt's shoulder. Spottedpelt suppressed a defensive growl. "It wasn't me!" she exclaimed firmly. "I found the catmint supply like this."

Tigertail dismissed the she-cat's message, firmly nudging her away from the ledge. He stared angrily into her eyes. "You deserve this," he sneered. "You put on your helpless act, while you're the true evil in the forest." Spottedpelt's fur bristled. *There's no way I can convince any cat.* She sucked in a breath and obeyed the tom. *I guess I just have to await punishment.*

Spottedpelt grudgingly ambled beside the tom, who dug up the vole she previously caught earlier and clamped it inside of his jaws. Tigertail muttered, "Come on," through full jaws. Spottedpelt ambled over with a nervous look on her face. She felt waves of indignant emotions radiating off of the big tabby tom. She crossed into a sandy flatland that stretched to faint outlines of oak trees that were abundant in ThunderClan territory.

What should I tell Vinestar? What if he doesn't believe me? What if he's going to drive me out of the forest, demote me from my deputy rank, or even kill me? Queries soared through the mottled she-cat's mind. She was jolted out of her thoughts by almost tumbling into a gully that bordered RiverClan territory. She exhibited a cry of surprise, shambling back from the edge of the precipice.

"Are you trying to be as slow as a tortoise?" Tigertail spat through full jaws. "*And* as clumsy as a headless chicken?" Spottedpelt narrowed her eyes angrily. She knew not to lash out, but she still had resentful feelings locked inside of her. *I didn't destroy the catmint! Stop treating me like a rogue!*

Spottedpelt grunted in response. Tigertail was waiting on the other side of the ravine with a quivering tail. Spottedpelt reluctantly crouched onto the ground and made an overly hasty lunge. She felt her heart stop as she hovered through the air, threatened with a possible injury or even death if she didn't make it. The possibility haunted her. *I should've just gone around!*

Horror drifted through her as she realized she may not land on the other side. She hollered for assistance, before quickly thanking StarClan as she was able to grasp on the sand that was clutched to the edges of the jaws of the crevasse. She felt her heart sink as she realized her hindquarters dangled into the large dip's jaws. Sand from the other side was spraying in curdling lumps into Spottedpelt's eyes and nose. "Help!" she cried as she vainly clawed at the surface. Her heart lurched at her feeble efforts. She knew she would be swallowed by the chasm if Tigertail didn't help her. Was he that cold to let her die?

Spottedpelt closed her eyes, ready to feel her fur being pulled the wrong way as she would plummet into the abyss. She became almost hopeless as she struggled to pull herself up. *I still have so much to do in my life! Please, StarClan, don't let me die!* She watched in horror her grip loosened. She went limp as her claws let go and she was on the path to being engulfed with darkness from the gully. Suddenly, jaws met her scruff.

Spottedpelt was hauled out of the crevice. Relief snapped through her and convinced her to peer open her eyes as she was placed in a bed of sand. *I'm safe.* She was stiff and in shock. Her pupils were like tiny moons and her fur bristled out like a porcupine's quills. *I-I'm safe..*

Tigertail's gaze flashed with a bit of concern, but he shook his head and his indignant look loomed back. Spottedpelt's heart pounded. She lifted her head to meet the tom's green gaze. Her body was shaking. "Th-thank you," she stuttered.

Tigertail grunted in response and grudgingly guided the dappled she-cat towards camp.

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Spottedpelt felt her breathing steady. The delicate juices of thyme that she chewed on seeped onto her tongue, helping her escape her state of shock. Willowheart's herb-drowned scent brimmed the air. Her concerned optics melted into the speckled she-cat's pelt. *I still don't know who destroyed the catmint. Or why I'd be chosen for Clan deputy. And Vinestar still doesn't know about the ThunderClan scent. I never told him!*

Panic started flowing through Spottedpelt's veins as uncertain thoughts bolted through her mind. It seemed Willowheart sensed it too. She prodded two poppy seeds a whisker-length away from the mottled she-cat. "Here," Willowheart instructed. "Eat these."

Spottedpelt shook her head. "I-I'm alright," she denied. "I can go without them."

Willowheart narrowed her eyes in a skeptical manner. She gave the other she-cat a faint nod, reluctantly sweeping the offered poppy seeds back into her store. Two more sets of paws entered the sets of logs and brushed past the tendrils that guarded the entrance.

Qualm sunk to the bottom of Spottedpelt's stomach as she recognized the two figures. *Vinestar and Tigertail.* Willowheart's tail quivered in a slightly indignant movement. "We need to talk to you, and her," Tigertail growled, implying Willowheart and Spottedpelt. "*Now*." Vinestar's teeth were clenched in a furious expression.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" Willowheart hissed, her voice irritated. Her eyes had flashed in a pang of fear as she saw the two WindClan cats' fuming expressions.

"It's urgent," Vinestar insisted, his voice angry. "I am your leader. You must obey me."

Willowheart's eyes flashed in fear. "Very well," she sighed. "What is it?" Spottedpelt watched with angst. What would Willowheart do when she gets the news that the dappled she-cat supposedly trampled over the catmint supply?

"The catmint supply was destroyed," Vinestar rasped. Willowheart's eyes glistened with fear. Spottedpelt felt panic rush through her. *It*

wasn't me! No!

Tigertail placed his tail on Spottedpelt's shoulder. "She trampled it!" he accused, cuffing her over the ear and snarling. Willowheart's muzzle wrinkled up in fury. But she wasn't staring at Spottedpelt.

"What?" Willowheart gasped. "You have to be mistaken!" Spottedpelt's feelings of fear were vanquished and replaced with confusion. *Why is she so protective of me? First she insisted that I become deputy, and now she doesn't believe Vinestar's words. But how not? Vinestar manipulated Jayheart, and he's probably manipulated every other member of his Clan too.*

"I saw her standing on the demolished stocks," Tigertail meowed in a deep voice. His eyes illuminated with satisfaction as he saw Willowheart's pupils widen.

"I spotted them that way," Spottedpelt chimed in, trying to raise the confidence in her voice. "I was seeing if there were any fresh stems. I did not trample the catmint."

Willowheart's tail lashed. "Spottedpelt's right," she claimed. "You shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"Fine," Vinestar snorted. "That's what you think. But I think different." The immense WindClan leader veered around and exited the den, followed by Tigertail. *Fox dung... what's he going to do? Willowheart has just made him angrier. I'm doomed.*

Willowheart's tail quivered with fury. She shifted her pupils over to fix her stare on Spottedpelt. "I'm sorry about that," she mewed. "I can't convince any of them to believe me." Spottedpelt was sunk even deeper into a lake of puzzlement. *I don't understand. What's so great about me? I wish I could just live a normal life. I never wished to be the deputy; or to be dragged into this sea of confusion.*

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"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Wind Stone for a Clan meeting," Vinestar called. Spottedpelt emerged out of the medicine den along with Willowheart and

Brokenpaw with a reluctant look pasted on her face. *What's he going to do with me?*

Vinestar narrowed his eyes and suppressed a mutter under his breath as Spottedpelt exited the den. The lithe she-cat noticed that he seemed to be exaggerating his emotions. *But why would he need to? He's already infuriated with me.* The WindClan leader's tail twitched impatiently against the stone as he waited for his Clan to muster in front of the Wind Stone.

Spottedpelt thought the camp felt weird without Jayheart waiting with an angry, lashing tail at the foot of the Wind Stone. She couldn't help but feel a pang of sorrow for her father after his death. Goldenheart had slayed the grey tom in the battle between ShadowClan and WindClan. Jayheart always would follow Vinestar through every battle and decision, but over time their relationship had grown into an immense quarrel. The former WindClan deputy had died a sudden death in the middle of his Clan's growth; or fall.

Spottedpelt was then jolted into reality. Anxiety welled back up inside of her as almost all of her Clan accumulated beside her, lifting their curious and perplexed gazes to fix onto Vinestar. Her fur bristled as Vinestar's dark blue eyes absorbed into her skin. His optics blazed like blue fire scorching her pelt.

The queens that padded out of the nursery were barely able to arrange in the cluster of cats before the WindClan leader spoke. "A traitor is among us!" Vinestar yowled. Spottedpelt thought his voice was blaring enough to reach the ears of the mountains. Cats were milling around her, exchanging accusing, anxious, or puzzled glances.

Tigertail narrowed his eyes that were threaded with livid emotions. He aimed them towards Spottedpelt, causing her neck fur to rise. *Great StarClan. This is worse than I ever thought this could get.* Spottedpelt shifted her gaze back up towards Vinestar. She felt like she was the only one to notice his satisfied look.

"'What kind of traitor?'" Vinestar quoted, probably from another cat's mind. The broad tabby was aiming to gather cats bewilderment together, only to shock them with Spottedpelt's

supposed traitorous act. "The one that destroys the catmint supply."

Spottedpelt sensed fear plunge through her. She imagined she was tumbling into the gully when her heart stopped. She felt a sensation of helplessness dart through her. *My Clan will hate me. Vinestar will hate me. Will Willowheart be the only one to be on my side? Or will she too give into Vinestar's manipulative words? Who actually destroyed the supply? Will WindClan get an outbreak of greencough?* Cats stiffened beside the mottled she-cat, their pupils expanding with fear. Tigertail seemed to be the most outraged, barely defeating the urge to screech out Spottedpelt's name. Cloverpatch reluctantly backed away from the crowd, trying to avoid being near any of the possible fugitives.

"Spottedpelt!" Vinestar roared. Gasps rose in the crowd. "Our own deputy destroyed the catmint supply." *No!* Spottedpelt froze with terror. Cats were shuffling, some even galloping away from her. Tigertail, in a furious manner, batted her on the ear and pushed her onto the ground, barely keeping his claws sheathed. The WindClan leader didn't do anything to stop it; he only kept his balance on top of the Wind Stone and waited for his Clan to calm down. But only if they wanted to. To Spottedpelt's surprise, Sorrelpath, Darkpool, Cinnamonpaw, Cloverpatch, and her former apprentice, Tansybranch, created a protective barrier around her.

"What proof do you have?" Tansybranch inquired, her voice laced with defensiveness. *Thank you.*

"I had sent her on a solo patrol," Vinestar reported. "I suggested that Tigertail can catch up to her, since he was on border patrol also. When he arrived, he found Spottedpelt digging around the trampled and dead stems in our catmint supply. The only conclusion I can come to is that she destroyed it."

Cinnamonpaw cast a doubtful glance toward the WindClan deputy. He narrowed his eyes and hesitantly padded away from protecting her. Spottedpelt lowered her head. *This is it.* She sat still and awaited punishment. Willowheart was indignantly waiting at the foot of the Wind Stone.

"Did you see her trampling it?" Willowheart asked snappily.

Vinestar stiffened, trying to think of how to reply. "She was digging under the stems," he growled in reply, curling his lips. Spottedpelt knew she *should* speak up, but she felt like claws were pinning her down from doing so. *What good would it do?*

Willowheart gaped her jaws to make another indignant response, but was interrupted by the broad WindClan leader. "Spottedpelt shall be confined to camp until further notice," Vinestar declared. "And if she is proven guilty, I will re-appoint a deputy. We will decide what to do with her then." The WindClan medicine cat was restrained with anger.

"You have no proof!" Willowheart repeated.

"Yes, I do," he sneered. "You, of all cats, should be the one that's furious. Thanks to Spottedpelt, if there is a greencough outbreak, we cannot combat against it." Spottedpelt's fur bristled with resentment. *How did StarClan even have the sense to give you nine lives?* She restlessly clawed at the grass. She was thankful her punishment wasn't worse, but at the same time, it was not backed up with any full proof. She wouldn't be able to help her Clan or go to any Gatherings.

"You need to tell your side of the story!" Sorrelpath whispered. Spottedpelt gave her a faint nod.

"I know that," Willowheart spat. "But I don't think you should go around and accuse cats of destroying catmint with no proof."

"I saw her!" Tigertail protested urgently. "What Vinestar is speaking of is true."

Spottedpelt lifted her muzzle and shuffled through the crowd. She paused, reluctance building up inside of her. Her sister gave her a reassuring lick to the shoulder. "Go," Sorrelpath directed softly.

"Vinestar, sir," Spottedpelt called reluctantly, dipping her head. "I had come across the catmint supply already trampled. I was digging around to find any stems that were still living. I apologize for this misunderstanding." The WindClan leader's eyes blazed.

"Silence!" Vinestar howled in a livid tone. "Did I give you permission to talk?" *I knew this was a terrible idea!* Spottedpelt's ears went flat on her head, and she whisked around back to the trio of cats that protected her.

"I'm sorry," Tansybranch mewed quietly. "You don't deserve this."

"I know," Spottedpelt sighed. "But I'm not only worried about me being confined to camp. Vinestar is mistaken. Some cat is going out and deliberately destroying our catmint supply. We must figure out who it is, and we can't let greencough come to ravish our camp."

"How are you even deputy anymore?" Darkpool asked. "I mean, you can't even exit camp. This is ridiculous."

Spottedpelt grunted in response. "There's nothing we can do," she replied grimly. She hauled herself over to her den and curled up in her nest. *First I almost died, and now I'm confined to camp. Can this get any worse?*

// Chapter Fourteen

Thistlepaw had been given her final assessment a few sunrises ago. A moon and a half had passed since she was revealed to have unsheathed her claws during a battle training session with her mentor, Squirrelchase. She had to perform the best of her ability on the final assessment; and ultimately did relatively well. She regretted her choice. *I need more time! How dare I of rejected extra time to defeat a foe?* But she also felt a bit satisfied. She would be allowed to leave camp on her own if she was made a warrior. Her mind was a huge debate, constantly in quarrel of what the right choice was.

She paced around camp in an anxious mess. Squirrelchase seemed to notice, as he was padding up towards the black and brown apprentice. *Great.* Thistlepaw's pelt bristled with irritation.

"Guess what?" Squirrelchase prompted. Thistlepaw could already predict what he was going to say. "I've been told your warrior ceremony may be occurring today." *Today? No!*

Thistlepaw didn't reply. She was stuck in an endless torrent of thoughts that soared through her mind. *Yes! I can finally exit camp. But I can't defeat a great foe! How else will my plan to gain SkyClan back even be considered? They'll probably be more opportunities. But there might not be!*

"Hello?" Squirrelchase hissed, his voice laced with annoyance. "You're probably going to be a warrior today." *I heard you, sparrow-brain.*

"Yeah," Thistlepaw sighed with a pang of sarcasm. "So great." She brushed past her mentor, emerging deeper into camp. *I should hear from the other apprentices; ask them what they've witnessed with the possibility.* She bounded to the apprentices' den. It was almost empty, except for her brother, Raccoonpaw. *Supposed brother.*

"Raccoonpaw?" she meowed. Raccoonpaw gaped his jaws apart in a

humongous yawn. He winced at the amount of sunlight that pricked his eyes. He shifted his head and blinked at the brown and black apprentice, his optics flashing with realization.

"Yes?" he asked. He shuffled out of his nest, meeting Thistlepaw's amber gaze. "What is it?"

"Have you heard any word going around about our warrior ceremonies?" Thistlepaw queried, her eyes narrowing. Raccoonpaw's ear twitched.

"Oh, yeah," he meowed. "Eaglefeather said me and you would be made warriors sometime in the next few sunrises. We did have our warrior assessment a few sunrises ago, you know."

Thistlepaw felt a bit of anxiety well up in her stomach. "Squirrelchase told me it would be today," she added, her voice shaking. Raccoonpaw gave her a confused look.

"Isn't that good?" he mewed. Thistlepaw froze.

"Yeah," the black and brown apprentice responded. "It's great." She forced the words out of her jaws. *I can't be a warrior yet! What in StarClan was I thinking when I did my final assessment?* Thistlepaw twisted around and left the den. Raccoonpaw seemed to be left even more puzzled than he was before. *No cat will* ever *consider my opinion!*

Thistlepaw raced across the clearing. Then the idea popped inside of her head. *If I'm sick, I can't become a warrior right? But if I fake it, no cat will believe me.* She didn't consider the consequences as she darted outside of the camp barrier. She bounded across dense undergrowth, boosting herself off of tree stumps and launching herself as fast as an adder making an attack for its prey. Desperation was surging through her veins.

Thistlepaw burst ahead with fury. Lush scents of bramble thickets and shrubbery ascended into her nose. She paused for a heartbeat to check for any sign of her Clanmates; before indignantly urging herself on. Foul fragrances started brimming the air, causing Thistlepaw to wince with disgust.

The brown and black apprentice's lungs heaved. She had bounded almost to the other side of the pine forest, which had opened to a clearing with a large metal box in the middle. It had Twoleg stuff leaking out, but among the bottom lining there were the small bodies of crow-food.

Thistlepaw's muzzle wrinkled up at the revolting stench. *Was this really a good idea?* She reluctantly backed up, before shaking the dubious thoughts from her mind. She straightened her four legs, emerging toward the large structure. *But if I'm ill, won't I just be made a warrior afterword? Will this really give me more time?*

The brawny she-cat had ignored her thoughts and already settled down in front of a rotting mouse. Her stomach seemed to churn at the thought of swallowing the putrid fresh-kill. She lowered her head, still reluctant to take a bite. She gaped her jaws and leveled them towards the rotting prey, before halting at the small shuffle of paws that neared toward her.

Thistlepaw lifted her head in alarm. She noticed Leopardpaw loom into her vision. Her fur bristled and her tail twitched. *How dare that flea-pelt follow me?*

"What in the name of all Clans are you doing?" Leopardpaw spat. "Eating crow-food?"

Thistlepaw suppressed a growl that rose in her throat. "Why did you follow me?" she countered, her tone dry. *All these obstacles are falling into my way. Is it this hard for me to make myself known throughout my Clan?*

"I wanted to know why you left camp by yourself," Leopardpaw hissed. "Keep in mind, Thistlepaw, that exiting camp without a warrior as an apprentice isn't allowed."

"Yeah," Thistlepaw snorted. "So why don't you leave before I tell Whitestar that you left camp?"

"It's only because of you," Leopardpaw snapped. "Your warrior ceremony is about to start. Don't you want to become a warrior? Or do you want it to be delayed more because of your mouse-brained

actions?"

Thistlepaw's eyes scorched like flames. She wanted to tie vines around Leopardpaw's muzzle to shut her up. She felt like she had tumbled into a pit of rage that absorbed her. She muttered something under her breath before resentfully staggering onto her paws.

Leopardpaw narrowed her eyes. "Come on," she meowed.

Thistlepaw grunted grudgingly in response. *Maybe I didn't consider all the possibilities. But I must go to bigger lengths to achieve my objective now. Maybe there wasn't always one way. Maybe there's more ways that wait like a fox stalking its prey.*

But Thistlepaw still felt furious with herself and everyone around her. *How could I fail so miserably? How could my Clan be so pathetic? The Clans should've just left me on that battlefield. Now, they've got a bigger storm approaching.*

Before she knew it, Thistlepaw was already leaping across the undergrowth that lead to camp with Leopardpaw. The black and brown apprentice stared angrily ahead. As a kit, she would always daydream what her warrior name would be. *Thistlebush? Thistlevine? Thistlefang?* But now, she didn't seem to care. The thought of her new name was placed at the back of her mind.

She felt her stomach churn again as she and the other apprentice turned and followed the scent trail that was a few fox-lengths from the barrier to camp. Feelings of resent snapped through her. *Why should I have to listen to this mange-pelt?*

But it was too late for Thistlepaw to produce second thoughts. She brushed inside of the ShadowClan camp barrier. She prayed to StarClan that Leopardpaw wouldn't reveal that she had exited camp without approval from her mentor or her leader. The black and brown apprentice noticed Shimmerkit, who was scavenging around the fresh-kill pile with a vigorous pace, flanked by her partners, Bluekit, Rainkit, Stormkit, and Smokekit.

Goldenheart followed her kits with an agitated look reflecting in her

optics. Not only because her only kit that was left of her litter was misbehaving and being too rambunctious around the fresh-kill pile, but because Juniperflower's stern gaze was absorbing into her pelt. Thistlepaw's mother had been set on apprentice duties until she retired to an elder because of her actions of having kits with a tom from another Clan. She was also required to leave camp with at least one warrior, Whitestar had stated.

"You all may get first pick," Goldenheart hissed to the five kits. "But that doesn't mean you can mess the fresh-kill pile up for the rest of the warriors."

Stormkit let out a huff of irritation. "We were just looking," he moaned. The other quarter of a dozen kits nodded at the grey tom's remark. Goldenheart's eyes flashed with a bit of annoyance.

"You should listen to Goldenheart," Juniperflower meowed sternly, casting an awkward glance toward the golden tabby. "You *definitely* don't want to experience scolding from the elders once they figure out what you've done."

Shimmerkit had a stubborn look on her face. "We just want to find a good catch!" she claimed.

Rainkit nodded. "Maybe a fresh squirrel," she suggested, licking her lips.

Thistlepaw was jolted out of observation as she was nudged by Leopardpaw. "Well?" Leopardpaw spat. "You're welcome."

Flea-pelt, Thistlepaw repeated in her mind. "For what?" she inquired, her voice dry as sand. "Following me? Yeah, thank you *so* much."

Leopardpaw's tail lashed. "And you were what?" she snarled. "Eating crow-food? Right before your warriors ceremony? It's the most mouse-brained thing I've ever seen any cat do!"

If only she knew. Thistlepaw gaped her jaws to make a dry protest, before the call rang in her ears. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Branching Elm!"

Thistlepaw's fur bristled. She felt anger scorch through her veins

again. She felt furious with not only Leopardpaw; but herself. *No. I'm livid with the Clans. They eliminated my home Clan. They destroyed all that was mine. They slaughtered my Clanmates. Why should I even become a warrior in this Clan that doesn't even deserve another member?*

The brown and black apprentice resentfully padded to the foot of the immense elm, hauling herself up and whisking up onto multiple branches. Goldenheart watched with pride illuminating in her eyes. Shimmerkit watched with an ecstatic look on her face, bouncing up and down with excitement. *This should be one of the best days of my life. But it's far from it. I can't stand becoming a warrior while I remember my ancestors who were slaughtered on the fateful day the Clans attacked them.*

Splashfall was even congratulating the senior apprentice on. Eaglefeather, while still indignant of his supposed mate, watched with delight. Squirrelchase even seemed pleasured as he watched Thistlepaw climb higher. Despite him reporting his apprentice to Whitestar, he seemed utterly thrilled.

Thistlepaw lugged herself higher, launching from branch to branch. She couldn't help but feel a pang of satisfaction run through her. But failure and regret still shielded the feeling to a minimum; looming into a cyclone of ambition. She was almost to the final branch; when she felt the limb under her paws tremble followed by a crack from under her. Her heart lurched in fear.

The black and brown apprentice reacted swiftly and hurled herself onto another branch, unsheathing her claws into the wood and jerking her four legs onto the surface. She fixed her gaze on the previous limb that snapped and toppled toward the ground. Shimmerkit was in the path of the descending log. Thistlepaw trembled with horror.

Just as the descending branch was going to make contact with the dark brown and black spotted kit, Splashfall bounded over and hastily grasped its scruff. The ginger and white warrior lunged herself and Shimmerkit out of proximity of the approaching limb, crashing into the dust with alarmed *mrrows*. Gasps of relief meandered throughout the crowd as the branch hurtled against the

ground, barely a whisker-length from harming Splashfall or Shimmerkit.

Thistlepaw's chest heaved with terror. She wouldn't of been able to bare watching her sister being crushed by the branch. *Even if we aren't connected by bloodline.* Whitestar's eyes illuminated with alarm, but he shifted them over to glance at Thistlepaw; inhaling a long breath and directing her over with his tail. Thistlepaw still seemed to be in shock; she followed the snow-like leader's orders barely with any extra thoughts.

Goldenheart had scrambled over and licked Shimmerkit vigorously; alarm and terror still threaded in her optics. Relieved drops of water filtered her eyes as she kept grooming her distressed kit. Shimmerkit didn't seem to resist. Her fur bristled with fear; and she occasionally let out fearful squeaks. Whitestar noticed and dipped his head, a pang of alarm striking his gaze. Cats were giving him indignant looks, believing their leader was barely reacting to the situation; but they still didn't dare utter a word.

Thistlepaw ascended to the final branch. A slight feeling crept up her spine. She imagined if the branch split from under her and the ShadowClan leader like the previous one had. Her neck fur bristled. Realization then swept through her again. The regretful feelings that haunted her drifted back. Her eyes were clouded with indignant emotions.

"I say these words with our ancestors approval," Whitestar called, lifting his muzzle to stare at the sky. He then lowered it, meeting his ice blue gaze with amber. "This apprentice has trained well with her mentor's guidance. She has learned to understand your noble code. Thistlepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

This is it. Regret tugged at Thistlepaw's stomach. She hesitated. "I do," she eventually responded.

Whitestar suppressed a proud smile. Thistlepaw noticed he didn't seem to show any sign that he had delayed her warrior ceremony at all. "Then with the guidance of StarClan," he announced. "I grant you your warrior name. Thistlepaw, you will now be known as

Thistlethorn. ShadowClan honors your fierce and ambitious nature, and we are proud to welcome you as a warrior of our Clan."

"Thistlethorn! Thistlethorn!" ShadowClan's calls rung in Thistlethorn's ears and mind. She felt angry she couldn't be yet recognized, but she also felt satisfied. *But this isn't the end.*

// Chapter Fifteen

"This is ridiculous!" Willowheart's voice stated, her tone indignant and exasperated. Spottedpelt's ear flicked. She spotted the WindClan medicine cat angrily treading up behind Vinestar. Vinestar's eyes rolled and he seemed to be trying to pad away from her. "You have no proof that Spottedpelt stole the catmint. You've kept her secluded to camp for more than a moon!"

Vinestar narrowed his eyes. "And what are you going to do when one of our warriors catch greencough?" he hissed. *It's not even leaf-fall yet. H-how can you be sure that will happen?*

"It's more common for greencough to spread during leaf-fall and leaf-bare," Willowheart retorted. "We still have a moon of greenleaf." Vinestar's pelt bristled.

The sun's mid-day rays drowned the camp. It turned Spottedpelt's coat completely amber, and transformed camp to a golden shade. Fiercetalon was by the fresh-kill pile dealing strokes of the tongue to his paw to cleanse it. He lifted his head once he heard the quarreling of the two WindClan members. Tansybranch settled beside Spottedpelt, looking bewildered. Lionrage and Gingerpaw emerged in between the two boulders that marked the entrance to camp. Gingerpaw had a rabbit clamped in his jaws, and a proud smile that lined his face. Lionrage gazed down at his apprentice with thrill; before lifting his muzzle when hearing Willowheart and Vinestar's feud.

More warriors around camp were pricking their ears and staring at the WindClan medicine cat and leader in bewilderment. "Even if she did destroy the supply," growled Willowheart. "She's had *plenty* of punishment. She's the WindClan deputy! She can't be confined to camp like this."

"Only because you *insisted* that she'd be given that role," Vinestar spat with frustration. "I deeply regret my decision."

Willowheart's tail twitched. "And because she's deputy," she continued, blocking Vinestar's way as he tried to pad away. "She needs to be able to assist her Clan like she vowed to do."

"So you want a traitor to become leader after me?" Vinestar snorted. "Nettlepatch sure taught you well, huh?" Willowheart's neck fur lifted at the mention of her mentor. Her eyes flashed with sorrow; before transforming to an even stronger flare of bitterness.

"Nettlepatch would want nothing to do with any traitors," Willowheart meowed in a shaking voice. "I'm sure of it. Spottedpelt is *not* betraying her Clan."

"How do you know?" Vinestar inquired, curling his tail around his paws. "I didn't see you there."

Tansybranch's fur bristled against Spottedpelt's. "Should we step in?" she whispered. *I doubt that'll help.* Spottedpelt shook her head. She watched with a bit of fear clouding her eyes. *I am tired of being secluded to camp, but would any cat be able to convince Vinestar to do any otherwise with me? A-and.. I didn't know or think about the dogs.. what if I am a bad deputy like most of the Clan says?*

"Listen," Willowheart coaxed. "As your medicine cat, I believe you should lift Spottedpelt's punishments. You do not have proof she destroyed the catmint supply, and she has had over a moon of seclusion to camp. And at the same time, I am the one that keeps the catmint in my den and fights greencough. I should've always been the one to judge this situation."

A few silent heartbeats passed. It seemed all of the Clan had held their breaths with anticipation. WindClan members ambled up to the scene with interest, anxiety, and confusion illuminating in their gazes. *Why is there this much hassle about me? Is it that big of a deal?* Vinestar scanned the clearing indignantly at the WindClan warriors gathering around him. "Come," he directed to Willowheart, pointing his tail over towards his den. "We'll discuss this in my den."

Willowheart narrowed her eyes, reluctantly deciding to follow the broad tabby. Vinestar seemed in a hurry and slightly embarrassed at the crowd that had built together. As the two WindClanners strolled

towards Vinestar's stone dip in the ground, the warriors around Spottedpelt muttered anxious, incoherent messages that overlapped. Spottedpelt kept her attention pointed at the two trekking figures, puzzlement and curiosity striking her expression as she blinked.

I want to be freed from punishment, but I'm worried Vinestar will be even angrier at the thought of me. How can I even be deputy of a leader that doesn't approve of me? Some of the cluster around Spottedpelt went to split up to return to their duties, but not without sending hesitating glances back to the leader's den.

Spottedpelt took in a deep breath and tried to set her fur flat, ready to assign a patrol. She tried to stand broadly, like a deputy should. "Fiercetalon," she started. The memory of Vinestar leaning on Tansybranch's shoulder and the rest of the patrol flashing furious looks toward her flooded her mind. She felt reluctant to set any patrols after Vinestar was attacked by dogs. It seemed her Clanmates were suspicious to follow her patrols as well. "Go with Gingerpaw and Lionrage to set markers on the ThunderClan border."

The three warriors hesitantly obeyed. They padded towards the barrier to camp in a line, Gingerpaw taking the rear. The realization that Spottedpelt couldn't follow them even if she wanted to kicked in as she started to trail up behind them. *You can't, remember?* She glanced around the WindClan camp, arranging beside a pile of logs and waiting for Willowheart and Vinestar to emerge from the leader's den.

The WindClan deputy felt guilty that she couldn't assist her Clan. All she could do was roam around camp, setting patrols, fixing damages in dens, and occasionally helping the elders with getting rid of their ticks. She counted every day until she could maybe go out and see the territory. She felt like she was still a kit cooped up in the nursery. Heartbeats passed of Spottedpelt loitering around the logs, her gaze fixed on Vinestar's stone overhang. Cats were granting her skeptical, narrowed-eye glances as they passed her.

Sorrelpath bounded up to the mottled she-cat, her flanks heaving as she panted like she dashed to the mountains and back. Spottedpelt blinked, slightly confused.

"I've been trying to find some other suspects that might've destroyed the catmint," Sorrelpath breathed. She kinked her tail behind her, separating her jaws to express her suspects, but was cut off by a concerned mew from Spottedpelt.

"You look exhausted!" the dappled she-cat gasped. "You know you can't tire yourself out that much when you should be in the nursery!"

"But Spottedpelt-" Sorrelpath started.

"What were you even doing?" Spottedpelt asked. "I didn't even see you when Willowheart and Vinestar were quarreling."

"Well," Sorrelpath sighed. "I snuck up on a patrol and tried to question everyone on it. Tigertail was on it, and when I confronted him individually, we argued. A lot. We basically argued and followed each other around a whole side of the moor. Well, until Fiercetalon put a stop to it.."

"But he's your mate!" Spottedpelt exclaimed.

"All cats get into arguments," Sorrelpath meowed. "Even the closest of mates. And Tigertail really want you out of this Clan." Spottedpelt craned her head and observed Tigertail, who was irritably loitering outside the warriors' den, casting impatient glances to the leader's den. "It's a good thing there's one cat that can keep that from happening." *Willowheart.*

Sorrelpath was still breathing heavily, and Spottedpelt sprung into action. "You should head to the nursery," Spottedpelt told the tortoiseshell she-cat. "I'll get you some fresh-kill and water." Sorrelpath looked as if she was about to protest, but she eventually nodded. "You can tell me more about what you learned there," Spottedpelt called to her sister before they both headed off.

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"Littlefoot, Lionrage, and Buzzardpaw all thought I was being ridiculous, and stated the 'obvious'," Sorrelpath explained, quickly lapping up some water from soaked moss. "Websine was pretty

decent. She was neutral, but being Lionrage's mate, she was still shiting towards his side. But she tried to understand our side, at least.."

Spottedpelt let out a huff of air. "At least I can help here in the nursery," she commented.

"Thank you, again," Sorrelpath meowed gratefully. Spottedpelt nodded to her, about to ask another question when she felt a small figure crash into her with an *umph*. She looked down to see Frostkit, embarrassingly scampering back.

"Clumsy!" Rockkit joked.

"You're the one who pushed me!" Frostkit squealed, leaping playfully towards her brother. Darkpool sighed and chuckled nervously.

"I'm sorry about them Spottedpelt," Darkpool mewed awkwardly as Rockkit and Frostkit rolled playfully in the foliage. Spottedpelt giggled.

"It's fine, Darkpool," she responded softly. "You don't need to be that hard on them. They're still in their youth; let them have their fun." Darkpool glimpsed doubtfully at her kits and tried to relax herself.

"Ow!"

"Take that!"

"I'm gonna get you for that!"

"Keep your claws in, mouse-brain! Don't you even know how?"

Darkpool tensed up. "Alright, that's enough." Frostkit and Rockkit tumbled off of each other. Rockkit parted his jaws in a hiss to his sister.

"Great," Frostkit spat. "Thanks for messing up my fur!"

"You sparrow-brains woke me up!" Grasskit snapped, quickly licking her chest fur. "Thanks a lot."

"Yeah, I think I'll just let you all take the job of taking care of kits," Spottedpelt purred to Sorrelpath. The nursery started to buzz with light laughter.

Frostkit puffed out her chest. "So you're calling us a hassle?" she squeaked.

"You'll understand once you have kits," Darkpool meowed softly, licking under the snowy she-kit's ears. Frostkit grunted in response.

"Just because we're she-cats doesn't mean we *have* to have kits!" Grasskit exclaimed.

Spottedpelt chuckled. She gazed warmly at the brown she-kit. She couldn't wait to see the three kits grow up into great warriors. Her ear flicked as she heard the scrape of paws against sand. The Clan was gathering inside of the clearing once again.

"Let all cats gather here beneath the Wind Stone for a Clan meeting," Vinestar meowed in a monotone voice, standing lazily on the Wind Stone. "Again," he added in a mutter under his breath. Many WindClan warriors, almost knowing what the rally was about due to the prior quarrel and pleased look on Willowheart's face, were arranged in a sloppy cluster from the back of the clearing to the foot of the Wind Stone.

Spottedpelt was nudged by Sorrelpath. An excited hiss escaped from the tortoiseshell she-cat's jaws. "Come on!" she urged. "This could be your chance to get lifted from your punishment!"

Spottedpelt blinked up at the upbeat she-cat. *It looks like Willowheart won the argument. But as much as I am looking forward to no longer being confined to camp, I also fear the future.* "Yeah," she responded. "I'm just a bit worried that Vinestar may do something worse to me in the future. Have you seen his attitude toward me? He looks at me like I'm a mouse he can never catch."

Sorrelpath gave a slight nod, but one of her eyebrows lifted to form a skeptical look. "So you'd rather be stuck in camp for another moon?" she retorted.

"Stupid furball!" Spottedpelt hissed jokingly. Her tone grew softer and serious. "But you know that's not what I mean. It's just-" the spotted she-cat was cut off as Vinestar's announcement repeated, this time in a louder and more irritated tone.

Amberstripe cast a sour look towards her daughters, signalling them over with a sharp twitch of her tail. Spottedpelt obeyed, darting over and uniting with the cluter of WindClan warriors. She lifted her muzzle; observing WindClan's leader through the murmurs of her Clanmates.

"What happened in the quarrel?" a she-cat mewed, her voice laced with anxiety.

"Vinestar better not be letting that *traitor* out of camp," a tom growled, hinting towards Spottedpelt as the traitor.

Darkpool was the last to arrive. She had given birth to her kits about three quarters of a moon ago. Their tiny bodies squirmed at her feet with muffled and excited mews. Spottedpelt imagined their insists to go to their first Clan meeting.

"It's Vinestar!" Rockkit squealed ecstatically.

"Clan meeting!" Grasskit added in spluttered words.

"Ugh!" Frostkit grunted as the two kits bounced playfully around her. "Calm down!"

Darkpool swept her three kits toward her flank with her tail, glancing lovingly down at them. "Keep yourselves on your best behavior," she directed softly. "You don't want to interrupt Vinestar during his announcements." Spottedpelt couldn't help but suppress a chuckle of amusement as the kits wriggled around in the small space they had, fussing over who could sit where.

"First, Spottedpelt had been *insisted* on being deputy by Willowheart," Vinestar addressed. "Then I was coincidentally attacked by dogs when she sent out one of her patrols. After that, she has been seen trampling the catmint. She has been on a punishment of being confined to camp, and now our medicine cat

has once again insisted it's been long enough."

Cats exchanged anxious murmurs, some backing away from Spottedpelt. Spottedpelt flattened her ears to her head. Anger boiled inside of her. *It wasn't me!*

"I have decided to lift her punishment," Vinestar continued. Some cats burst into an outrage.

"No!" Tigertail jeered. "Are you mouse-brained? She's already done so much to our Clan!" Vinestar normally would've lashed out with fury if his cats protested against his decisions; but it wasn't fully his, nor did he approve of his choice. *Can't Tigertail not be so prickly for once? I mean, I guess I can partly understand why he's like this...*

Other cats murmured around the clearing. Some stayed in uneasy silence, while some shouted out in protest. Willowheart narrowed her eyes towards the cluster of cats. She had an expression of empathy towards Spottedpelt, before shifting her gaze up to stare at Vinestar and signaling him with her tail to go on.

"My daughter never approved of you or my mate's choices," Amberstripe growled, her voice laced with envy that Spottedpelt was made deputy. "If I were you, you should re-appoint a new deputy right now."

Vinestar started to gape his jaws, obviously satisfied by Amberstripe's request. Willowheart lashed her tail, staring furiously at her leader. Vinestar grudgingly shut his jaws, silencing the crowd. "I'm afraid our medicine cat has said otherwise," he muttered, his voice indignant. "Spottedpelt, you are free to leave camp." *Yes!* Spottedpelt felt a wave of relief crash over her. "But," the WindClan leader continued. "You must be escorted by a warrior or an apprentice."

A deputy *escorted by an* apprentice? Spottedpelt didn't know how to feel. Should she be glad, or does she still deserve to be angered? Willowheart's expression softened a mouse-length, but she still didn't seem fully pleased. Voices of protest traveled through the crowd of cats. Vinestar swept around and lunged himself off of the Wind Stone, resentfully padding back to his den.

The cluster of cats began to break up. Spottedpelt strolled over to assist her sister and guide her towards the nursery. Sorrelpath leaned wearily on the mottled she-cat's shoulder. *Her kits should be born soon.* The tortoiseshell she-cat seemed exhausted compared to when she arrived to the Clan meeting. She moaned in agony, going limp and heaving a large relieved breath when she and the WindClan deputy arrived in the nursery and she was set down on a soft, moss bedding.

"Thank you again for everything," Sorrelpath meowed.

"No problem," Spottedpelt answered, glad to assist her sister.

"I'll be on the lookout for any cat that acts suspicious," Sorrelpath continued.

Spottedpelt nodded to the she-cat. *Now I can finally serve my Clan in more ways than one.*

// Chapter Sixteen

Spottedpelt waited outside the nursery with excitement bubbling through her veins. Sorrelpath was giving birth to her kits; and her sister had been told to wait outside the nursery until she was given permission to enter by Willowheart, who was inside of the nursery to assist Sorrelpath. Tigertail waited beside Spottedpelt, keeping a fox-length away from her. His eyes were narrowed, forming a skeptical look.

Spottedpelt was almost oblivious to the big tabby tom, she was overtaken with anticipation and excitement. She could imagine her kits growing up to become strong warriors, and even having kits of their own. She felt so proud for her sister. However, she could never tell if she wanted to have any kits. She was deputy; she had her Clan to serve; even a leader position ahead of her.

"Come in," Willowheart's soft voice directed. Tigertail shoved past Spottedpelt, brushing her nose with his tail. Spottedpelt shook her head with an irritated hiss, lowering her head and emerging into the sandstone structure. She beamed with joy.

Three tawny figures squealed and squirmed at Sorrelpath. One, the broadest of the figures, seemed to be nudging his siblings aside for a fight for his mother's milk. The others, one a tom and one a she-kit, let out cries of desperation and eventually nuzzled into spots on their mother's belly. Sorrelpath looked exhausted, but still had a large smile chiseled across her muzzle. Tigertail, his eyes glowing with pride, brushed his cheek against his mate's.

Willowheart also had joyful, sparkling eyes. She gazed down lovingly at the small scraps of fur.

"Did you name them?" Spottedpelt asked, her voice still traced with amazement.

Sorrelpath responded to her sister with a faint nod. "Yes," she responded softly, her voice weak but elated. She pointed her tail

towards the she-kit. "This is Eelkit," she meowed, before signaling towards the small tom. "This is Shrimpkit," she continued, before pointing her tail to the broadest tom. "And this is Eaglekit."

"Fabulous names," Tigertail commented warmly. "I could've never thought of any better." He twined his tail with his mate's, stroking his tongue affectionately across her ear. *I could never be more proud of you, sister.*

"Congratulations," Spottedpelt praised, her voice sincere.

Darkpool sat a few tail-lengths away from them. "Yes," she rasped. She grunted in irritation as Frostkit bounded over towards Sorrelpath and her litter. The white she-kit's optics illuminated with fascination as she neared towards the other side of the nursery.

"They're so tiny!" she exclaimed, prodding Shrimpkit in the side, causing him to trip.

"Stop!" gasped Spottedpelt as the newborn kit let out a wail as it tried to stammer back onto four paws. Sorrelpath glanced up with alarm.

"Get back here!" Darkpool chided. "And don't lay a single claw on them *ever* again."

"My claws were sheathed, though!" Frostkit protested.

Tigertail's eyes blazed in fury. "Go," he hissed defensively. Spottedpelt watched the sleet-like kit back away from the trio of kits that writhed at Sorrelpath's belly. *Frostkit doesn't seem to understand how fragile newborn kits are.*

Frostkit eventually dashed back towards her mother. Grasskit and Rockkit had stirred, shifting their astonished gazes over to look at the three tawny kits.

Spottedpelt was ecstatic. Even though the kits weren't hers, she still loved them like they were. The moon's light turned to a dawn that swallowed the WindClan camp, pouring into the open ceiling of the nursery. Spottedpelt gaped her jaws in a yawn. Her paws were weary from trekking on many evening patrols. She had not slept a

heartbeat that night.

Sorrelpath's eyes drooped with fatigue. Her kits seemed to have quenched their hunger, as they started to curl up and suppress purrs at their mother's belly. Tigertail's gaze glowed lovingly as he held his pupils to stare at his kits. Eaglekit was the only one awake, vigorously switching positions to try and sleep.

Frostkit was blocked by her mother's tail as she sat down and watched in awe. Rockkit shoved beside her, wanting to get a better view. "Don't bother them," Darkpool admonished, her voice laced with irritation. Frostkit suppressed an irritated grunt.

Sorrelpath softly swept her tongue across Eaglekit's face. "It's okay," she whispered. "You can sleep." A few heartbeats later, Eaglekit sneezed, waking up the other two kits. Sorrelpath and Tigertail let out a chuckle of amusement. Sorrelpath purred, and eventually the rest of her kits copied and curled back up.

"Come on," Willowheart meowed softly to Spottedpelt and Tigertail. "We should let Sorrelpath rest." *I wish you the best of luck, Sorrelpath.*

Tigertail reluctantly paused his grooming of his partner, lifting his head. He padded towards the entrance, Spottedpelt in front of him. Spottedpelt was flooded with happiness. She darted over to the warriors' den, dipping under the granite overhang and padding towards her nest.

The spotted she-cat curled up in a pile of moss in the corner of the den, letting her body go limp and resting her head on her paw. Moments later she fell into sleep.

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Something jabbed Spottedpelt in the ribs. Spottedpelt awoke to Darkpool staring anxiously at her. *What's going on*?

"Come," Darkpool directed, her voice urgent. "You should probably be here to help your sister." Confusion and worry seized Spottedpelt.

"What's going on?" Spottedpelt asked as she shuffled onto her paws,

her voice laced with concern.

Darkpool took a moment to respond as she and Spottedpelt darted towards the nursery. "Shrimpkit and Eelkit caught a cough," she explained in a quivering voice. "With the catmint gone, and if they have greencough, well.." the dark gray-blue she-cat didn't need to say any more. Spottedpelt's eyes flashed in terror, layered with sorrow. *No! StarClan, please no!*

Spottedpelt pelted into the nursery, her lungs heaving. Willowheart was pressing on Eelkit's chest. The tawny, starting to appear black, white, and ginger tortoiseshell huffed a row of congested coughs. She gasped for air and suppressed a wail of agony. Willowheart, Tigertail, Sorrelpath and her kits, and Darkpool and her kits were gathered in the nursery.

"Sorrelpath! Sorrelpath!" was all Eeelkit could wail. Sorrelpath's eyes were drowned in dismay and anguish. Willowheart's optics also flashed with pain. She nudged Eelkit over to her mother. Sorrelpath grasped the scrap of fur inside of her two paws, comforting her with soft messages. Her tear dribbled onto the tawny she-kit's fur.

Eaglekit's nose twitched. Waves of sadness and confusion radiated off of him. He was lightly scooped up by Darkpool. "No, Eaglekit," she mewed softly, her voice trembling with grief. "There's something going on with your siblings. Y-you must stay here."

Eaglekit let out a desperate cry. Spottedpelt was staring at the scene with sorrow and horror. *This can't be happening!* She couldn't imagine how Sorrelpath felt. Her kits would be ripped away from her the day they were born.

Willowheart nudged Shrimpkit, who she just examined, over towards her sister. Her eyes were foggy with agony. "I'm sorry," she wept. "They show all the signs of greencough. I-I can't do anything about it. The catmint supply is destroyed, a-and there is no tansy in our territory." *NO!* All of the cats that sat in the nursery froze with horror.

"Greencough?" Frostkit gasped.

Tears welled up in Sorrelpath's eyes. She gave a look of grief towards Shrimpkit and Eelkit, dragging them towards her chest. Eaglekitkit howled out in anguish. He may not of been able to understand words yet, but he could detect the horror and sorrow that flooded the nursery.

"This is your fault!" Tigertail yowled to Spottedpelt. His eyes scorched like green fire. *I didn't do it!* shouted a voice in the back of Spottedpelt's mind. She opened her jaws to speak, but all that emerged was a squeak. She was overwhelmed with shock and grief.

"Sorrelpath," Willowheart mewed, her voice shaking with distress. "I advice we end the kits' suffering by feeding them deathberries. I'm sorry-"

"No!" Sorrelpath screeched, tears trickling down her pelt. "If you had just come earlier, maybe you could've prevented this!"

"With all do respect," Willowheart whimpered, her voice weaved with empathy and grief. "There's nothing I can do. I advise we should give Shrimpkit and Eelkit a painless journey to StarClan."

"Stay away from my kits, you excuse of a medicine cat!" Sorrelpath sneered, pain striking her gaze. She sheltered Shrimpkit and Eelkit protectively with her body. Spottedpelt watched the two quarreling cats with tearful eyes. *Please, StarClan, please don't let Shrimpkit and Eelkit die!*

Tigertail had fled from the nursery in a sorrowful mess. Cats were staring with horror, disbelief, and grief shining in their optics. Willowheart dipped her head. "As you wish," she mewed. She turned around and emerged out of the nursery entrance, turning back, her face containing a grieving look.

Sorrelpath curled her kits closer, weeping over their tiny bodies. Shrimpkit started a streak of painful coughs, followed by Eelkit. They started shivering and cried out in agony. *How could Sorrelpath watch her kits in this condition? But, she would want to at least say goodbye.* Spottedpelt felt like she was being torn into two. What should she think? She still couldn't process the amount of grief Sorrelpath was going through. Sorrelpath looked as if she was

bleeding out, her blood turning the sand crimson.

Spottedpelt had tears building up in her eyes. She turned her head to stare at Eaglekit. "I'm sorry," she mewed, her voice shaking. "We can't save your brother and sister. You must stay away from them or else you may catch greencough." Spottedpelt knew Eaglekit's immune system was too weak to fight off a disease at his age. She didn't seem to consider, or care, if she could catch greencough. *I'm sorry.* She curled beside her sister, grooming Eelkit's head. Sorrelpath washed Shrimpkit's pelt, seeming to deny the situation.

Eaglekit let out a distressed meow, but was held back by Darkpool, who was looking with sorrow in her eyes.

***

Spottedpelt blinked open her eyelids. Shrimpkit and Eelkit were still. She felt like a boulder had crushed her. She knew it would come; but she didn't feel like it'd be so soon.

"They're dead, Sorrelpath!" she cried. She prodded Sorrelpath awake, who immediately knew what happened.

Sorrelpath's eyes filled up with tears and she buried her face into Shrimpkit and Eelkit's fur. She was flooded with grief, and so was Spottedpelt. *StarClan, no...*

Darkpool's eyes blinked open from the commotion. Her eyes were immediately seized with sorrow, and she lowered her head respectfully. Rockkit, Frostkit, and Grasskit stirred, waking in a large yawn. Their eyes brimmed with dread, and they fearfully neared the scene.

"Are they...?" Frostkit breathed. Spottedpelt rested her chin on the she-kit's head.

"It's okay," Spottedpelt mewed softly, struggling to keep her voice from trembling with sadness. "They're with StarClan now." *I'm sorry we couldn't save you,* the spotted she-cat thought mournfully.

Sorrelpath couldn't release her grip. She nuzzled the two still kits' bodies, sobbing. Eaglekit was roused out of sleep, and suppressed

distressed and confused shrieks. Darkpool let go of the tawny tom, her eyes flooding with misery. Eaglekit stumbled over, sniffing around to detect his siblings' stale scent. He cried out with sorrow, curling beside his siblings.

His mother reluctantly rose her head, her optics damp with tears. "We s-should tell V-Vinestar," she concluded in a small, quivering voice.

"Take as much time as you need to mourn," Spottedpelt directed softly. Her sister nodded, anguishly grooming her three kits' fur. The nursery went silent, the moon's light gushing into the nursery. *May StarClan light your path, Shrimpkit and Eelkit...*

// Chapter Seventeen

Frostkit arranged herself next to Sorrelpath in the middle of camp, nuzzling Shrimpkit and Eelkit's fur. *I can't believe this! StarClan, why?* She rested her head on Shrimpkit's flank; shutting her eyelids and absorbing his stale scent. Spottedpelt sat next to Sorrelpath, muttering comforting, incoherent messages to her sister.

Tigertail had his head facing the ground on the other side of the clearing. He was so dreadful that he couldn't even bare to shoot one glance at the two lifeless scraps of fur. He also seemed terrified to step even a single pawstep toward Spottedpelt because of what she supposedly did. Frostkit didn't fully believe his story about the WindClan deputy trampling the catmint. Spottedpelt always seemed so nervous and soft; she could never of done such a thing to her Clan.

Rockkit staggered over to Frostkit's side. His ears were drooped, and his tail was limp with sadness. He was followed by Grasskit, who lay next to him. *I didn't even get to know Eelkit and Shrimpkit.* A few heartbeats passed until Frostkit could hear the broad steps of Vinestar. She blinked open her eyes and turned around to see the immense figure.

Vinestar's neck fur had risen. "We will mourn greatly for Shrimpkit and Eelkit," he declared; his voice seemed to be hasty. *I hope you really care.* But Frostkit supposed he probably did. But she still doubted it. "But," the WindClan leader continued. "The only reason was because we ran out of catmint. And we know why."

Tigertail's tail lashed, and with scorching optics, gazed over at Spottedpelt. "I suggest more punishment is required," Vinestar concluded.

Spottedpelt and Sorrelpath's fur bristled. Frostkit's heart lurched. *Please, no more drama! I just want to have a normal life in WindClan!* Sorrelpath stammered onto her paws, defense washing over her face. "Haven't we already been through enough?" she hissed, her

pelt standing straight. "Spottedpelt loved Shrimpkit and Eelkit as much as I did."

"This was her fault," Vinestar snorted. *That's probably not true!* "Why take her side? She caused the death of your kits."

Sorrelpath's tail twitched. Spottedpelt glanced up at her, her gaze mixed with anxiety and sorrow. Sorrelpath inhaled a heavy breath, gaping her jaws to speak again. "No," she mewed defensively with pain painted over her eyes. "I know my sister. I know she wouldn't do such a thing."

Tigertail lifted his head; his eyes blazing with fury. "How can you be so mouse-brained?" he growled, his voice still congested with dread. "Your sister trampled the catmint. I saw it with my own eyes."

Frostkit felt a bit of doubt strike through her. Did Spottedpelt destroy the catmint or not? Darkpool had said that she was just digging to look for any living stalks; but Frostkit was starting to question if that was true or not. *I'm only a moon old! I don't need to be burdened by all of this!* The white she-cat rested her head back onto the two kits' fur. *I don't know who to blame! Oh Eelkit and Shrimpkit, why did you have to join StarClan so soon?*

"No," Sorrelpath repeated, her voice growing cold toward her mate. "You saw her *digging*, trying to find if there were any living stems. She should've never been punished for something she didn't do." Spottedpelt gave the ginger, black, and white tortoiseshell she-cat a grateful glance.

Vinestar's tail twitched in response as he indignantly turned for his den, Tigertail snorting and staring back at the ground. *But... who did destroy the catmint? Who is to be blamed for Shrimpkit and Eelkit's deaths?* Frostkit closed her eyes, the conversations of WindClan brimming her ears.

"It's such a tragedy," Cloverpatch commented mournfully.

Her voice was followed by another she-cat's; Frostkit couldn't tell who; that remarked, "I can't even imagine how Sorrelpath feels."

Frostkit was nudged by Darkpool. "Come on," Darkpool mewed, her tone empathetic. "We should let the others mourn."

Frostkit reluctantly nodded, feelings of sadness snapping through her. Realization swept through her that she would never see Eelkit or Shrimpkit grow up; or even again until she joined StarClan. *Why had I agreed to leave?* She went still, feeling tears build up in her eyes.

Darkpool started to drag Frostkit away by the scruff; the white she-kit letting out a defying wail. *No! I need more time to say goodbye!*

"Let her stay," Spottedpelt mewed softly. Darkpool hesitantly nodded, placing Frostkit back onto the bedding of sand. Cloverpatch, Tansybranch, Littlefoot, and Buzzardpaw had come to also mourn Shrimpkit and Eelkit. *I will remember you forever.*

***

Crickets chirped, their voices echoing through the landscape. The soft inhaling and exhaling of slumbering cats soothed the clearing, followed by soft brushing of sand and the whisper of wind. Frostkit's ears had blocked out the sounds until she started stirring, still trying to dash away from the harsh reality in her dreams.

The white she-kit was flanked by Darkpool, who was suppressing weary, soft whimpers as if living the harsh past days again. Darkpool had somehow been able to stay asleep past her cries and memories, unlike Frostkit who started delicately half-opening her eyes.

Ugh. I was sleeping relatively well for a day like today. She shut her eyes again, switching positions and curling close to her mother. Rockkit and Grasskit slept on the white she-kit's mother's other side, snoozing silently and blending in with the audio of camp. The thought of Eelkit and Shrimpkit started flashing through Frostkit's mind, causing her to shutter with terror.

After what felt like seasons of trying to sleep, Frostkit opened her eyes again. *Maybe I should go in the camp. But I don't want to tell Darkpool. She won't allow me. I could say I'm going to the dirtplace,*

maybe. Just something to get me tired. She eventually stammered onto four paws, feeling the feeling of sorrow and grief sink into her stomach once again. She extended her pupils for her strongest vision.

Sorrelpath was snoozing on the other side of the nursery. Frostkit narrowed her eyes as she noticed something peculiar; she didn't see any small scrap of fur near her mother. A pang of fear jolted through her as she realized Eaglekit had vanished. *I can't lose another denmate!* Frostkit jabbed Darkpool sharply in the flank. The dark blue-grey she-cat, after a few nudges, indignantly and confusedly opened her eyes.

"Frostkit..?" she muttered, her voice trailing off with weariness. Her green eyes were barely squinted open, but her gaze lightly rested on Frostkit.

Frostkit roused her awake with another sharp prod, stifling an urgent meow. "Eaglekit is gone!" she exclaimed with utter urgency. Darkpool's eyes widened with shock, and she started to stammer up. Grasskit and Rockkit, with bewilderment, started stirring around her.

"What?" Darkpool gasped. Frostkit nodded, anxiety glistening in her eyes.

Darkpool shuffled aside Grasskit and Rockkit and gaped with shock as she came to realization the tawny tom had disappeared. With an alerted call, she nudged Sorrelpath awake. *Where is he?* Frostkit shuffled her paws anxiously in the spots of moss as Sorrelpath softly peered open her eyes.

Sorrelpath's fur bristled right away as she seemed to realize there was no other figure sharing warmth with her body. Her pupils darted around in fear. "W-where..?" she breathed, her pelt standing on end and her voice squeaking with worry and sorrow; probably remembering her other two kits and hoping she wouldn't lose another.

"We don't know," Darkpool responded with a shake of her head; her voice laced with anxiety. Rockkit and Grasskit's ears pricked, and

they gave each other and Frostkit uneasy and worried glances.

Sorrelpath seemed like she already had accepted Eaglekit as dead; staring at the ground. Darkpool gave her a reassuring look; granting her a quick lick to the shoulder. "We shouldn't give up now," she mewed. "I'm sure he'll show up soon if we look."

"I'll check the apprentices' den," Frostkit claimed. She felt a rush of excitement go through her that she would be able to explore the apprentices' den, but it transformed to worry once she remembered the reason. Darkpool reluctantly agreed with a nod and a signal with her tail.

"Wait!" Rockkit whined, flanked by Grasskit. "Can we go too?"

"Fine," Darkpool sighed. "We'll check the warriors den after we alert the camp," she added, assisting an anxious Sorrelpath in sitting up from her moss bedding.

Frostkit would be glad she was out of her mother's watch; ecstatic, actually. But with the disappearance of Eaglekit, she couldn't even try to. Her and her siblings padded outside of the nursery; pelting towards the apprentices' den. The trio of WindClan kits crossed into its territory: an assortment of dying logs and stones that led to a hole dipped into a stone clearing. Her other two siblings trodding ahead of her into the tunnel where most apprentices slept, Frostkit dealing a quick glance at the place aboveground, scanning for Eaglekit. She hoped to find his black, ginger, and white tortoiseshell pelt, but felt a pang of disappointment as she didn't.

"Come on!" Rockkit hissed to Frostkit.

"Coming," Frostkit meowed in a hasty response, being dithering to decide whether she should search the arrangement of logs and boulders a bit longer or follow her siblings. As Rockkit gave her another irritated hiss and a beckon with his tail, she decided to duck under the stone overhang and trek over towards him.

Emberpaw snoozed toward the entrance, and she peeked open her eyes as she heard the kits' steps. "What are you all doing here?" she asked, her voice sleepy and more curious than insulting.

"It's Eaglekit," Frostkit responded urgently, shoving past her siblings. "H-he vanished. We don't know where he is."

Emberpaw's optics lit up with fear. "What?" she gasped, her voice ending with a distressed squeak. "Another kit is lost?"

Grasskit puffed her chest out. "No," she countered, her voice trying to be confident. "We're going to find him."

Emberpaw gave the brown she-kit a faint nod. "I haven't seen him around here," she observed. "You can look if you'd like."

The three kits nodded in response. They dashed deeper into the crevice, peering at every hidden corner. *Please be somewhere in here, Eaglekit!* Frostkit glanced at a pile of rocks that seemed to have been created by some of the apprentices. She cleared out some of the stones, searching for a small tawny body that might be hiding under it. She frantically shot glimpses at each corner. She winced as she heard an irritated hiss coming from Tallpaw. She realized she had trampled on the brown and white tom's tail.

"Watch your step," Tallpaw growled, blinking with bewilderment as he realized the white she-kit's identity. "What are you doing here?"

Emberpaw padded up next to the tom. "Eaglekit's gone missing," she reported, the core of her tone anxiety. She didn't have time to make a snarky reply to him. The stakes were too high. "Frostkit, Grasskit, and Rockkit were sent to look for him in the apprentices' den."

Tallpaw narrowed his eyes. "Well," he grunted. I haven't seen him here." His gaze seemed to flash with anxiety and slightly soften. "But I hope you find him soon."

Frostkit nodded as Tallpaw rested his head back onto his forepaws and started to comfort himself with purrs to try and fall back asleep. The white she-kit lifted her head and scanned around the clearing, making sure she wouldn't step on any other tails. Emberpaw had started trailing out of the den, watching carefully towards every nook and cranny.

Frostkit's heart lurched with realization that Eaglekit probably

wasn't in the apprentices' den. As she took a look at another corner, she heard soft pawsteps from behind her. She swept around and spotted Rockkit and Grasskit creeping toward her.

"We couldn't find him," Grasskit admitted. "Any luck with you?"

Eaglekit, no.. please! Don't be gone forever! Frostkit shook her head, disappointed. "No," the frosty she-kit responded. She felt like the apprentices' den was closing on her. Grasskit and Rockkit dipped their heads.

"Come on," Rockkit directed. "Let's see if Sorrelpath and Darkpool had any luck."

Frostkit agreed with a slight nod. Her mind gushed with worried thoughts. She tried to convince herself not to jump to any conclusions, but she had little success. She couldn't stop the brief flashes of Eaglekit laying on the ground, motionless like his siblings. Eelkit and Shrimpkit had their burial during the previous sunset; Frostkit didn't want to have to see it. She already felt bad enough. Would she of even been able to bare watching them being buried into the ground, not to be seen ever again? Sorrelpath and Spottedpelt had been sent out to bury the two kits. They had come back looking worse than they were when they had left. *Why would Vinestar of sent them out when they had already been through so much?*

Frostkit emerged out of the stone gap at the rear of her two siblings, shivering at the bit of cold that started nibbling at her pelt. She dreaded leaf-fall and later the coming of leaf-bare. What if more cats caught greencough? What if her mother, her siblings, or even herself caught the disease? She sucked in an immense breath. *N-no. There's no need to worry. W-we'll find some more catmint..*

The three kits dashed to the center of the clearing; glimpsing around to search for their mother. Cats were scrambling around camp with uneasy expressions and anxious chatters. Coincidentally, Sorrelpath and Darkpool were just coming back from the medicine cat's den. *I guess they checked the medicine cat's den after the warriors' den.* Disappointment rushed through Frostkit as she saw the two she-cat's expressions; worried and defeated.

Sorrelpath's emotions seemed to perk for a heartbeat; until she identified the three kits'. "Any sign of him?" she asked, her voice weary.

Grasskit shook her head. "We're sorry," she mewed. "We didn't find any trace of him."

Frostkit added onto her statement with a guilty tone. "If we had just been fast enough, maybe-" she started, cut off by Darkpool's message.

"It's not any of your faults," Darkpool intervened, her voice serious.

Spottedpelt then padded up beside them. "I-I checked the elders den," she meowed in a shaky voice. "Eaglekit wasn't there." After a few moments, she lowered her head. "StarClan, please let Eaglekit live," she murmured, her voice threaded with desperation and worry. "Please let him get back to his mother."

Vinestar trotted up to the cluster of WindClan cats. His expression was blank. "Any sign of him?" he rasped, his tone barren as well. *I bet you don't even care!*

Frostkit gaped her jaws to express her thought, but her mother's tail blocked her mouth, some of its fur invading Frostkit's fur. She spat a bunch of her mother's fur out, followed with an indignant hiss. *You don't even care! You don't even care that Eaglekit could be dead!*

"No," Sorrelpath squeaked as Vinestar gave her a stern stare.

"You did this," Tigertail and his low growl startled Frostkit. The brown tabby tom was facing Spottedpelt with a livid expression.

Spottedpelt went stiff; oblivious on how to respond. She looked like she was frozen to the bone. *Is it? Should I be blaming her for Eelkit and Shrimpkit's deaths?* Frostkit saw Sorrelpath step beside her sister.

"No, she didn't," she hissed, her green eyes flashing with pain. *Wouldn't Sorrelpath agree with her mate? Or does she believe her sister?* Tigertail narrowed her eyes at Spottedpelt, whisking away with a disgruntled expression.

Spottedpelt's shoulders softened as the broad tom left, and glanced back up at Vinestar, who still waited with a twitching tail. Frostkit assumed the WindClan leader would join in Tigertail's argument, maybe claiming, a "He's right," or "Sorrelpath, you should consider your mate's remarks." But Vinestar said nothing.

Darkpool watched with a worried expression, Grasskit and Rockkit at her feet. Frostkit glanced back over at the three figures, considering to join them.

"Me and Spottedpelt will search for Eaglekit out of camp," Sorrelpath volunteered, not waiting for Vinestar's response as she started padding away and signaling with her tail for her sister to follow. Vinestar watched with a skeptical expression; but after a few heartbeats he turned away and strolled off to grab a vole from the fresh-kill pile. *Who will set the patrols while she's gone? Well, it's still night, so I guess Spottedpelt doesn't need to. But will Sorrelpath and her find Eaglekit? What if he's gone forever? What if he's dead? What if-*

"Come on," Darkpool directed softly. "I know it's been a long night, but we need to go back to the nursery." *But what about Eaglekit? W-we could check the apprentices' and warriors' den again, or-*

"Come *on*," Rockkit ordered as Frostkit drowned in her thoughts.

"I'm coming!" Frostkit snapped. *Can you be less respectful? Eaglekit could be dead!* The white she-kit didn't want to be reprimanded by the dark grey tom again, so she darted ahead and eventually arrived in the nursery. She arranged herself in her moss nest, her mother and siblings settling around her.

Camp seemed to calm. Frostkit pretended she was trying to sleep; but was truly exploring through her thoughts. She felt weird without Sorrelpath inside the nursery sleeping softly on the other side. She imagined Eaglekit's appearing-tortoiseshell body, sightlessly rummaging around the nursery. She then thought of him in the forest, shivering from the cold and burrowing into the cleft of a tree with a fearful expression.

Eaglekit, please be alive..

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Frostkit barely got any sleep for the rest of dark. She had tossed and turned in her nest, until blinking open her tired eyelids as dawn lights started pouring into the nursery. Not even considering to ask her mother's permission, she shuffled up from her nest and dashed outside into the clearing. She searched for Spottedpelt and Sorrelpath, a worried feeling crawling up her spine as she didn't spot them.

StarClan, please don't let them be lost too! A voice came from behind her.

"Who gave you permission to come out here?" Darkpool asked, her tone more empathetic than accusing.

"S-sorry," Frostkit stammered. She glanced up at the dawning sky. "I hope Spottedpelt and Sorrelpath make it back soon."

Darkpool arranged beside the snowy she-kit. "They're tough," she comforted. "If there's something out there, they can get past it. I assure you." Frostkit grunted in response. She felt like she could still find a slither of doubt in her mother's voice.

After what felt like seasons, Spottedpelt and Sorrelpath came racing into the clearing. They seemed to be on high alert and sorrowful; but not hopeless. WindClan cats stuck their noses out of their dens at the she-cats' arrival, some exhibiting worried looks while some were relieved.

Vinestar padded out of his den. "Well?" he inquired to the two she-cats.

"No sign of Eaglekit," Spottedpelt started. "But I think we have a clue. We found a strong scent trail of fox dung, but even past the horrid stench, there was also ShadowClan's. Two she-cat's. They must've taken him."

Of course! They want revenge for the battle we caused. Darkpool had told Frostkit about the attack on ShadowClan; and how Goldenheart unlawfully took a mate from another Clan and had given birth to

Moonkit, Shimmerkit, and Brinekit. It has also been rumored, but not confirmed, that her previous litter was also half-Clan.

Vinestar shifted his gaze to Sorrelpath. "Are you *sure* we can trust her?" he meowed, his tone mocking.

Sorrelpath's fur bristled with resentment. "Positive!" she growled. "I was there too."

Vinestar rolled his eyes.

"Well?" Tansybranch prompted. "Are we going to get revenge?"

"Are you mouse-brained?" Lionrage spat. "They know we're coming! They'd tear us to shreds!"

We need to get Eaglekit back! StarClan knows what ShadowClan will do to him? Frostkit shuffled her paws in the sand. At this time her siblings had started arranging next to her, casting anxious and confused looks.

"There is no need to attack," Vinestar announced. "ShadowClan has already taken Flakepelt and Jayheart from us. It's not worth losing lives for a meer kit." *What? No! We must get Eaglekit back! That's what we fought for before, remember?*

"Plus," another warrior meowed. "No cat can be certain it was them. We can't be reckless in battle."

Many WindClan warriors protested, but many sat in reluctant bunches. Frostkit felt helpless. She was just a tiny kit in a huge cluster of WindClan members. What could she even do? Darkpool directed Frostkit and her siblings back towards the nursery, and they resentfully followed. *Eaglekit, I promise I will try my hardest to save you.*

// Chapter Eighteen

Two shapes prowled in the evening, a golden she-cat carrying a tawny tom-kit. They crept along the boundary of rolling moors, their silhouettes barely visible in the night that stretched over the sky.

We did it. Thistlethorn was one of the figures, still gaping at her achievement. She was flanked by her mother, Goldenheart.

"We've reached the Thunderpath," Goldenheart cautioned in a mouthful of fur. "Careful not to wake the kit up when we cross." *Don't you think I know that?* But Thistlethorn chose not to make her spiteful comment. She only grunted in response, her eyes reflecting with slight grudge as she shielded her mother with her tail as they trekked along the paved path.

Thistlethorn felt slightly stiff with fear, but she learned from Squirrelchase that letting her own fear get to her while crossing the Thunderpath could be a death wish. She and Goldenheart started racing faster, the thought of monster's vicious snarls haunting them. They eventually arrived at the opposite side, waves of relief crashing over them.

Just as Goldenheart was still catching her breath, Thistlethorn was signaling her towards a tunnel brimmed with briars that stuck out. Goldenheart's neck fur lifted with reluctance. Was it really a good idea to bring a kit through a tunnel that could very easily wake it up?

It was too late to really think their decision through. The two she-cats already dashed for the tunnel, carefully avoiding the briars that stuck out from the stone, moss-worn walls. "There," Thistlethorn sighed as she decided they were far away enough to speak. Her eyes flashed with reassurance. "We will not lose this kit, Goldenheart." *Not on my watch. This is what Jayheart gets for killing Brinekit.* Sorrow tugged at her heart at the memory of her adopted brother.

"No cat can be sure, Thistlethorn," Goldenheart's anxious mew went.

"It mays still catch a sickness, or the Clan may not accept him, or-"

Thistlethorn cut the golden she-cat off, giving her a playful shove while still making sure not to wake the shape dangling from her jaws. "Stop being so negative, Goldenheart," she meowed slyly, Goldenheart's eyes narrowing to a skeptical look. "I'll make sure none of that happens."

The two she-cats quickened their pace. The kit in Goldenheart's jaws started to stir. Fear overtook Thistlethorn and Goldenheart. *We've gone too far to stop now.* Thistlethorn started to gently stroke the tom with her tongue across the ear. He eventually seemed to calm and go back to his sleeping state. Goldenheart huffed a breath of relief.

Thistlethorn eventually emerged out of the shaft that led into the ShadowClan camp, wincing as the final briars pricked her. But as Goldenheart took a final step, the kit snapped open his jaws and started to cry with distress.

No, no, no!

Goldenheart and Thistlethorn froze in alarm. Weary figures appeared out of their dens, their gazes illuminating with confusion. Goldenheart looked the most terrified. She had already been punished before; she seemed to absolutely dread her next punishment. *Everyone was going to find out anyway.. but it shouldn't of been like this.*

Thistlethorn tried grooming the tom-kit's nose, but it seemed to only make it worse. The kit started writhing around in Goldenheart's grip, indignantly howling and wailing. *Great StarClan, this kit is barely larger than a mouse but he has the voice of a lion!*

"Goldenheart's up to something else?" Thistlethorn heard Eaglefeather's voice hiss. The spotted black and brown tom's tail started to lash.

Other confused mutters rung in the clearing, followed by the milling of puzzled ShadowClan cats. Whitestar appeared outside of his den, approaching Goldenheart and Thistlethorn with an angry,

narrowed-eye expression. Goldenheart went completely stiff with horror, the tawny kit in her jaws starting to slightly calm, only crying out occasionally.

"Goldenheart, what is this?" Whitestar inquired, his voice and expression interrogating. "Whose kit is this?"

Goldenheart was still stiff with terror. As Whitestar's tail started to lash, she hesitantly exhibited a deep breath and gaped her jaws to speak. Before any words could sound from the she-cat, Thistlethorn intervened. "We found this kit alone in the marsh," Thistlethorn meowed, her voice broad and honest-sounding. Goldenheart could barely even tell her words were a faux.

Whitestar lowered his skeptical gaze to fix on the kit. It had a tawny body that looked to be growing into a black, white, and ginger pelt, and a black spot on the tip of its ear. While still being a newborn, the kit seemed to be growing strong. It was perfectly healthy, which made Whitestar even more doubtful. If it had been stray on the marsh, wouldn't it of been weaker?

The ShadowClan leader gave the kit a sniff, strong marsh scent wafting into his nose. Thistlethorn and Goldenheart hadn't forgotten to encoat the miniature scrap of fur in marsh scent. *I'm not that mouse-brained.*

"What in the name of StarClan?" Weedtail snorted. His eyeballs rolled as he recognized the two figures.

"Whitestar..?" a she-cat's voice went. "I don't know if it's a good idea to bring a loner kit into our Clan."

"Shh!" a tom hissed. "He's still thinking!"

Thistlethorn ignored the voices that sounded around her. Goldenheart only seemed to tense up more beside the black and brown she-cat, jaws fastening harder on the kit's scruff. After a flick of his tail, Whitestar finally spoke.

"I suppose we can keep it for a few temporary moons," he presumed reluctantly, aware of the crowd attracting around him. Slight

murmuring filled the air. "But no more of this, both of you," Whitestar continued, shifting his optics to Goldenheart. "Especially you, Goldenheart. You've snuck out of camp without permission too many times. You will be required to leave camp with a senior warrior, not of your kin, or else there will be consequences."

Goldenheart slightly nodded, sighing of great relief. Whitestar whisked away, some ShadowClan warriors backing away from the newborn kit. Goldenheart and Thistlethorn raced to the nursery, dipping below the overhang. Honeyleaf watched with confusion, her kit, Dawnkit, at her flank.

Goldenheart set down the tawny kit, purring, "Hello Hawkkit!"

Thistlethorn turned her head to Goldenheart, slightly confused and irritated. "Hawkkit?" she asked.

"Er, yeah," Goldenheart responded. "I thought that would be a good name." Thistlethorn's expression grew thoughtful. *That might work.* She carefully nudged Hawkkit into a clump of moss, where the tawny figure started to lightly purr.

"Who is that?" Honeyleaf hissed, her voice sour. "I can tell he's not of your litter." *Ugh. Now we have to deal with her.* Dawnkit quietly rested at Honeyleaf's belly, carefully inhaling and exhaling.

"His name is Hawkkit," Thistlethorn snapped. "And we found him in the marsh."

"And Whitestar agreed to let him seek refuge here?" Honeyleaf questioned, curling her tail protectively around Dawnkit.

"Yes," Thistlethorn growled. "He did."

"I doubt that," Honeyleaf snorted. Thistlethorn narrowed her eyes. *That sparrow-brain of a queen really is a pain in the neck.*

Goldenheart paused in grooming Hawkkit. "Honeyleaf," she mewed softly. "Hawkkit is just like any other. You of all queens should understand that we should never leave a stray newborn by itself." *It's good Honeyleaf doesn't know the truth. Goldenheart's always been good at hiding it.*

Honeyleaf grunted in response, staring with a suspenseful expression at Hawkkit. *She doesn't even know how much I want to teach her a lesson.* Dawnkit exhibited a slight yawn, her nose trembling as she arranged into a different position.

"So Whitestar is going to let you take care of Hawkkit despite your crimes?" Thistlethorn whispered to Goldenheart. She added in a mutter, "because I'm not going to."

"What other choice does he have?" Goldenheart responded. She glanced at Honeyleaf. "She sure doesn't want him."

Thistlethorn gave her mother a slight nod. "Whitestar had said he'd let Hawkkit stay for only a few temporary moons. Does that mean he's going to drop him off at Twolegplace?" Goldenheart's hackles slightly stood up at the possibility.

"I'm sure he won't," Goldenheart reassured, trying to hide her doubts. She didn't do that well, however. Thistlethorn could still detect a large trace of doubt hidden in her tone. "Hawkkit looks like he'll turn out to be a great warrior," Goldenheart continued before grooming Hawkkit's back. Her eyes looked lovingly and wistfully at the kit, as if imagining a great future.

"And I'll make sure of it, too.. this kit will mean a lot to ShadowClan," Thistlethorn murmured. She heard the light scuff of paws against the nursery ground. She turned around and spotted Pigeonfeather stepping under the overhang.

Pigeonfeather twitched his tail, noticing Honeyleaf sheltering Dawnkit and fixing her fearful and angry amber gaze on Hawkkit, Thistlethorn, and Goldenheart. "Er," the ShadowClan medicine cat started awkwardly. "Mosspelt wanted me to take Hawkkit to the medicine den to examine."

"For what?" Thistlethorn questioned, her tone partially suspenseful.

"Well, any number of things," Pigeonfeather answered. "Fleas, ticks... he was found in the marsh, anyway. We need to make sure he doesn't have any symptoms for whitecough, or-"

Goldenheart cut him off. "Yes," she mewed. "You can take him." *I should be able to trust my brother. But what about Mosspelt? How does she feel about letting Hawkkit into the Clan?* Thistlethorn reluctantly let Pigeonfeather fasten his jaws around Hawkkit's scruff, hauling the tawny kit out of his nest. It wasn't that she didn't trust her brother, but that she was unsure what Mosspelt would think of him.

Hawkkit whimpered, his exhausted eyes slowly and slightly opening. Thistlethorn felt excitement raise the fur along her spine. Pigeonfeather quickly set Hawkkit back into his nest, amazement reflecting off of his optics as Hawkkit fully stretched open his eyelids.

"You've opened your eyes!" Goldenheart gasped, stroking the tom gently with her tongue.

Hawkkit had a tremor as he tried to wander around, his legs quivering. His green eyes glistened with fascination at the sight of the new environment. He stumbled in the moss, exhibiting *mrrows* of surprise as he collapsed.

"*Moder*! *Moder*!" Hawkkit squealed in muffled speech, brushing up against Goldenheart. Thistlethorn chuckled.

"Great," Honeyleaf snorted. "Now I have to listen to that thing even more." Thistlethorn shot the tabby she-cat a glare.

"Congratulations," Pigeonfeather praised. Goldenheart gave the grey tom a grateful nod. Mosspelt then squeezed through the entrance, indignant and confused emotions igniting in her expression.

"What's all the noise about?" Mosspelt hissed. "Pigeonfeather, didn't I tell you to-" she stopped herself as she noticed Hawkkit's gaped, green eyes. Embarrassment grew on her expression. "He opened his eyes?" she observed.

"Mhm," Goldenheart hummed, her expression glad and brimmed with love. She guided Hawkkit back onto four paws, as if his destiny was becoming clearer and clearer by every heartbeat. Thistlethorn couldn't help from imagining it, too. The tawny tom-kit staggered up, his legs wobbling as he strolled to the other side of

his nest. He squealed with excitement.

"It's alright Dawnkit," Thistlethorn heard Honeyleaf comfort. "I know we have a new... visitor, but I'm still here." Honeyleaf started grooming her black-furred kit over the ear and eyelids, facing Dawnkit's small head away from the trio only several mouse-lengths away. *Fox-brain.*

Mosspelt padded over towards Hawkkit's nest, prodding damp moss toward him. Hawkkit took slow, gentle laps of the water. Mosspelt sniffed the tom, brushing her paw over his flank and over to his chest and went quiet. He could hear the interval of heartbeats coming from the tom. "Seems normal," she mewed. "But me and Pigeonfeather should probably still take him for a full examination."

Hawkkit exhibited an irritated *mrrow* as Pigeonfeather fastened his jaws around his scruff and stole him from his nest. Thistlethorn narrowed her eyes at her brother. The velutinous tom retreated from the nursery, lowering his head and strolling into the clearing. He was pursued by Mosspelt, who carefully ambled out from under the overhang.

Whitestar supplanted the two medicine cats, his ice blue gaze firm. "Goldenheart, Thistlethorn, meet me in my den," he ordered. Honeyleaf blinked at Thistlethorn and Goldenheart with an expression consisting of smug and satisfied emotions. Thistlethorn and Goldenheart's fur bristled. *I thought we already got this situation over with.*

Thistlethorn bounded behind Whitestar, her tail twitching with slight unease. She dashed into a crest with a stone enclosure and fortifying briar tendrils hanging down from the roof of the overhang. She noticed Goldenheart's pelt puffing out beside her and the golden she-cat's yellow eyes widening. Whitestar's tail curled around his paws as he settled into a sitting position, eyes narrowing.

"What's the whole story?" Whitestar inquired, his voice partly sharp. His gaze fixed on Goldenheart. *You've always been good at covering up the truth. Why should this be hard?* Thistlethorn mused, contempt slightly laced in her thoughts. But she couldn't help but feel worry

welling up in her stomach and a shiver crawling up her spine. She imagined Hawkkit's destiny crumbling, and her heart suddenly lurched at the thought.

"W-well," Goldenheart started, stifling a deep breath and sitting up straight. "We went on a hunting trip. We heard a small whimper, and on the other side of the Thunderpath, at the marsh, there was a kit mewling. It looked a few days old. T-the Twolegs must've abandoned it, or something.. but, we took it back. We couldn't leave it alone." Thistlethorn gave her a slight nod.

"Thistlethorn?" Whitestar questioned, fixing his look onto the black and brown she-cat. "Is what your mother claimed true?"

"Yes," Thistlethorn responded, dipping her head deferentially. Whitestar blinked, repeatedly switching his surveying look around to the two she-cats. He paused at Thistlethorn.

"You may leave," Whitestar meowed to Thistlethorn, directing his tail towards the entrance. Thistlethorn carefully sat up, reluctantly climbing out of the overhang. Goldenheart shuffled behind Thistlethorn, causing the black and brown she-cat to look back. The peach queen was halted by Whitestar's black tail which curled over her paws.

"Only Thistlethorn," Whitestar rasped, his eyes slightly squinting even smaller. Thistlethorn's fur bristled with fear. *Can Goldenheart explain herself good enough?* Whitestar shifted his blue gaze to her, flicking his ear to point at the exit.

"O-oh," Goldenheart squeaked, sweeping back around and settling down at her spot. Thistlethorn made one last hesitant bound outside of the entrance, the early sun rays flooding into her perception. Warriors buzzed around the ShadowClan camp.

Bluepaw and Rainpaw playfully chased each other, darting around the glade in a flash of blue-grey fur. Juniperflower and Leopardsnout chattered among each other. Leopardsnout had recently been given her warrior name the same time Thrushwing had. Raggedjaw had a freshly killed frog in his jaws, placing it carefully on the fresh-kill pile. Dusttail and Treeflight padded

behind Pinewhisker. The ShadowClan deputy suddenly cocked his head to Thistlethorn.

"We need you for a hunting patrol," Pinewhisker ordered to Thistlethorn. Thistlethorn shot an uneasy glance at the leader's den. There was still no sign of Goldenheart or Whitestar. Thistlethorn reluctantly nodded, joining the line of warriors that bounded towards the barrier. She emerged past the pine needles, the ground crunching beneath her paws.

I hope Goldenheart makes it out of Whitestar's den without getting her pelt ripped off.

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Thistlethorn had rushed through her hunting trip, pushing past the barrier with a vole and a mouse clamped inside of her jaws. Dusttail, Treeflight, and Pinewhisker seemed to know why she was in such a hurry. Thistlethorn swiftly disposed her prey into the fresh-kill pile, ignoring the rumbling that seized her stomach.

Pinewhisker trailed behind the black and brown she-cat, wielding a robin and a squirrel. Dustail and Treeflight had three mice and a starling all together. They all set down their prey, Honeyleaf emerging from the nursery.

Honeyleaf prodded the vole Thistlethorn had caught towards herself. "Pigeonfeather and Mosspelt want you," she grumbled as she starting devouring the prey. *Queens... always hogging all of the prey. Same with the kits. But what gets on my nerves most is the elders. All they do it sit on their hindquarters all the time, supposedly passing down stories from generations.*

"Don't you have a kit to look after?" Thistlethorn spat. Honeyleaf grunted in response, grudgingly carrying the torn up vole towards the nursery, its blood dribbling across the ground.

"Blood?" Rainpaw shrieked, stumbling back and bumping into her sister, Bluepaw.

"It's only vole blood," Bluepaw meowed. She dipped her head and

lapped some of the crimson liquid up, her face screwing up into a disgusted expression. "Blech, and dirt!"

Rainpaw burst out with laughter, patting Bluepaw on the shoulder with her paw. "Mouse-brain," she purred.

Dusttail clicked her tongue. "Honeyleaf these days," she mewed, slightly amused. "She's been pretty cantankerous."

"Your sister needs to learn not to be such a grump," Treeflight joked. *Yeah, really.* Remembrance suddenly split through Thistlethorn. She veered around, surveying the clearing for Goldenheart or Whitestar. Honeyleaf had said Pigeonfeather and Mosspelt needed Thistlethorn. Did that mean Goldenheart too?

A voice rung behind Thistlethorn. "Didn't Honeyleaf tell you I and Pigeonfeather needed you?" it hissed. Thistlethorn turned around to recognize Mosspelt, who's expression was partly irritated.

"Sorry," Thistlethorn responded, whirling her paw around in the grass. "I'm just waiting for Goldenheart to come out from Whitestar's den. I had been dismissed early."

"I don't know why it would've taken this long," Mosspelt mewed. "Well, er, Hawkkit is fine. He's in really good health for being found in the marsh." Her voice seemed honest and believing. *Good. That means she believed Goldenheart and I.* "I'll return him to the nursery right away," the silver tabby she-cat continued, respectfully dipping her head to Thistlethorn.

Thistlethorn stopped her. "I don't suggest that yet," she meowed, slightly awkwardly. "Honeyleaf doesn't seem very accepting of Hawkkit. I'd rather wait until Goldenheart is back."

"Er, okay," Mosspelt agreed, turning her head to stare at the nursery. "Yeah, she has been a bit... *different* lately." *What's that supposed to mean?* Thistlethorn gave a slight nod, and Mosspelt dashed for the medicine den.

Not long after, Goldenheart bounded from the leader's den,

Whitestar's gaze burning into her pelt. Thistlethorn watched with a feeling of fear bubbling inside of her. *What happened?* She pelted over towards her mother, her expression intertwined with curiosity.

"Did it go well?" Thistlethorn panted.

"I think it went okay," Goldenheart answered quietly. "But Whitestar is good at hiding things. I honestly don't know.."

"What did you tell him?" Thistlethorn asked, her voice laced with a sliver of concern. *Not for Goldenheart. For Hawkkit.*

"Well, how we came back," Goldenheart responded, her pelt pricking with uneasiness. "How we found Hawkkit, what condition he was in, things like that.."

Thistlethorn gave her mother a slight nod, strolling over to the fresh-kill pile and picking a fresh-killed shrew. Goldenheart headed to the nursery, Thistlethorn making a quick trip to the medicine den to fetch Hawkkit. *I'll listen to the whole story later.*

// Chapter Nineteen

Whitestar's call echoed in her ears. Thistlethorn drowsily gaped open her eyelids, yawning and stirring from rest. *What does he want now?* Raccoontail, who flanked her, suddenly sharply elbowed her in the side, an alerting hiss awakening from his jaws.

"Can't you see I'm up, mouse-brain?" Thistlethorn spat, irritation laced in her voice.

"Hey," Raccoontail purred, brotherly playfulness engulfed in his tone. "There's no need to act like you have ticks in your pelt."

Thistlethorn's tail started to lash, its fur standing straight. *Does he ever know when to stop?* A growl suppressed inside of her throat. "Enough with the jokes," she snorted. "You still act like a kit. At least Whitestar had the sense to make me a warrior before you." Raccoontail suddenly looked hurt, giving his sister a faint nod and whisking away. Thistlethorn felt a twinge of regret pound through her; but she sent it away with a shake of her head.

She arranged onto four paws out of her nest, shaking any leftover moss bits from her coat. She peered out of the den, sun pouring into her vision. *You'd think all these pine trees would block that nuisance of a sun, but no*. She placed her paws onto arrangements of pine straw that were glued onto the earth, emerging further into the clearing.

Whitestar was fixed proudly on the Branching Elm. Thistlethorn noticed he was on one of the lower branches. She shuttered when she remembered when she was being remembered being appointed a warrior, when one of the limbs had snapped and gone down, down, down towards the ground. *It almost crushed my sister. No.* adopted *sister.*

Thistlethorn then noticed it must've been Shimmerkit's ceremony. The black and brown spotted kit squealed with alarm as she was nudged closer to the Branching Elm by Goldenheart. She tried to resist the prodding, crying out with alarm.

Goldenheart finally seemed to give up. "Er, Whitestar," she started awkwardly. "Do you think you could move her ceremony off of the Branching Elm? Shimmerkit's still pretty traumatized by what happened before.."

"I don't want to be squished!" Shimmerkit added. Goldenheart shot a sympathetic glance to the apprentice-sized kit.

Whitestar's gaze churned with thoughtfulness. He still had a slight grudge against what happened with Goldenheart, but he still seemed to accept Shimmerkit as a member of his Clan. "Very well," he finally sighed, lunging down and landing perfectly onto the pine straw in front of the Branching Elm. Shimmerkit still had her ears pinned back to her head, seeming to be scrunching like a beaten up ball of moss if she cast one glance at the Elm.

ShadowClanners were arranging into a large crowd, excited murmurs spewing from their jaws. Pinewhisker stood beside the Branching Elm, his water blue eyes speckled with pride. Mosspelt and Pigeonfeather sat nearby to Thistlethorn. Dusttail and Honeyleaf chatted behind. Her first litter of kits, Shadepaw and Maplepaw, had been made apprentices about two moons ago. Speaking of her two kits, they all dashed up inside of the cluster of ShadowClan cats.

Thistlethorn felt a slightly smaller head bump into her back. She cocked her head around, baring her teeth and staring angrily at the apprentice who had accidentally rammed into her; Shadepaw. "Go back!" Shadepaw mewed in a shrill voice. He stumbled back with his brother, finding another spot to sit in. *Apprentices these days. They're always acting like kits who just left the nursery.*

Goldenheart groomed Shimmerkit, nipping at a speck in her pelt. "Stop it!" Shimmerkit whined, turning away. "I'm fine!"

"No, you're not," Goldenheart hissed. "I want you to look splendid when you're made an apprentice." Shimmerkit grunted in response, Goldenheart's next lick going over her cheek.

"Blech," Shimmerkit groaned. She grudgingly let Goldenheart gently wash her ears, nose, and the back of her head. Thistlethorn watched

with amusement. *Goldenheart did that to me too when I was being made an apprentice. Glad those days are over.* The brown and black she-cat then recalled the memory of failing to defeat a foe. It made her feel bitter inside. She would be an ordinary warrior forever; she would never be able to get SkyClan back, wouldn't she? *No. I will. I promised myself.*

Treeflight and Heavycloud were the last to arrive at the rally, Treeflight giving his chest a quick lick. Some warriors tilted their heads in confusion as they noticed Whitestar's paws were set on the ground. Thistlethorn felt like she could empathize with Shimmerkit a lot. Probably because they were supposedly sisters. *But we aren't actually related.*

Everyone went silent as they waited for Whitestar to speak. "We gather under the Branching Elm this morning to commemorate Shimmerkit," Whitestar started to announce, shifting his warm gaze onto Shimmerkit. "Shimmerkit, you have achieved the age of six moons, and the time has come for you to become apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Shimmerpaw." He slightly glanced around the clearing, as if reassuring himself his choice of mentor would be right. "Your mentor will be Thistlethorn. I hope she passes on all she knows to you." *Me?* Thistlethorn's pelt bristled with excitement.

"Shimmerpaw! Thistlethorn! Shimmerpaw! Thistlethorn!" the crowd cheered.

Whitestar silenced the crowd with a twitch of his tail. "Thistlethorn, you have proven yourself worthy to take on an apprentice. You have received magnificent training from Squirrelchase, and you have shown yourself to be fierce and courageous. You will be the mentor of Shimmerpaw, and I expect you to pass on all your knowledge onto her." *Oh, I will. I'll tell her* everything *I know. Even what you don't know.*

Thistlethorn padded over to her new apprentice, meeting noses with one another. *It seemed Whitestar has started warming up to me.* She could already feel tides of ecstatic emotions bubbling up from Shimmerpaw.

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"Are the other Clans vicious? Have you ever fought another patrol on your own? Oh! Have you ever defeated your mentor in training? Are you a good fighter? Are you a good hunter?" Shimmerpaw's questions cascaded from her jaws.

"Maybe I could answer your questions if you give me enough time," Thistlethorn growled through clenched teeth.

"Oh, sorry!" Shimmerpaw mewed. "I'm just really excited, that's all!"

Thistlethorn grunted in response.

"I'm so glad you're my mentor!" Shimmerpaw squealed. "I didn't really want Raccoontail. He's too... jokey. I didn't really want Pinewhisker either. I mean, wouldn't it be quite awkward to have the *deputy* as your mentor? Squirrelchase, well, you know him. And-"

"Shimmerpaw," Thistlethorn hissed. "Do you want to tour the forest or not?"

"Sorry.." Shimmerpaw responded, ashamed. She and her mentor approached a selection of leaves and moss that were held on the ground. Shimmerpaw gaped with amazement. She dashed toward a pile of maple leaves and leaped inside, sending leaves into the air in flurries. Leaves and pine needles clung to her pelt.

"Don't mess that up," Thistlethorn chided. "It's there for a reason."

Shimmerpaw embarrassingly shook the leaves off of her pelt and stammered out of the pile, cursing to herself about how she can't keep herself on appropriate behavior. She tried to brush the leaves back into their arrangement, just then noticing the other organized piles and fixing her gaze on them with fascination.

"What exactly is this place?" Shimmerpaw marveled, awe and curiosity laced in her voice.

Thistlethorn felt satisfaction run through her. *So this is what it's like being a mentor.* "This is the Storage Ground," she explained. "It's

where we put extra supplies for building dens and other things."

The Storage Ground had pine trees that held large sheets of bark between another, and in small crests in the ground held collections of sap. Tansy, marigold, coltsfoot, and thyme grew in some spots of the exposed earth. Thistlethorn padded over to the area, carefully sniffing around. Trees overhung the habitat, casting large bunches of shade that drowned a large portion of the storage.

"Come on," Thistlethorn directed. "There are a few more places we need to visit."

"Ooh!" Shimmerpaw chirped. "Then can we do battle training?"

Thistlethorn gazed down at the new apprentice. A twinge of reluctance rose inside of her. *I need to make sure to control myself and not train too roughly.* "Better late than never," she finally grunted.

Shimmerpaw practically tripped over herself at her mentor's answer. She squealed with excitement, almost falling back into the pile of leaves. Thistlethorn's pelt bristled with irritation. *Maybe Whitestar just wanted to get Shimmerpaw off of his tail. He probably gave that irritating apprentice to me because I'm still on his bad side,* she thought scornfully. *But I can change that easily. It already seems like Shimmerpaw is pretty submissive and believes practically everything any cat tells her.*

Two small paws tackled Thistlethorn's tail. *Speaking of trampling over others' tails...* Thistlethorn violently jerked around and firmly nudged Shimmerpaw away, brushing her tail across the brown, black spotted apprentice's nose. Shimmerpaw suppressed a sneeze. "Hey!" she mewed, shaking her head.

"Come on," Thistlethorn hissed. "We're going this way." She flicked her ear to a small trail drowned with pine straw and dispersed leaves.

"Okay..." Shimmerpaw responded grudgingly. She set off with her mentor, astonishment striking her expression at every view she thought was intriguing. *It's just a bunch of leaves, pine straw, nettles,*

and trees. What's so exciting about that?

"Apprentices these days..." Thistlethorn muttered to herself. After several horse-lengths of travelling, she and her apprentice approached an opening. It was one region that was not littered with pine straw and leaves; one that made Shimmerpaw exhibit a shiver of her pelt. Pine trees filled the small region with shadows, producing an eerie setting. However, they didn't make Thistlethorn even flinch. The black and brown she-cat seemed used to the place. "We're here," she meowed.

Shimmerpaw gave a faint nod. "So this is where we battle train?" she asked, her voice laced with slight reluctance.

After a quick lick of her paw, Thistlethorn responded, "Yes." She continued, educating, "This is the Training Clearing. Not the most unique of names, but it'll do." She padded to the middle of the dusty circle, bunching her shoulders and stretching her muscles. *Remember: don't go too hard on her.* The small warning rung in Thistlethorn's head.

Thistlethorn suddenly lunged at Shimmerpaw, batting her with her front paws. Shimmerpaw cried out with shock; but after a heartbeat she seemed to adapt to the training session, realization snapping through her. She veered around to confront her mentor, clumsily leaping for her side.

I'd think she'd at least be smarter. Thistlethorn easily saw the move, mockingly and easily moving out of the way, Shimmerpaw crashing onto the ground. She pinned her down by the back with sheathed claws. Shimmerpaw started to writhe around from under Thistlethorn's grip.

"Maybe do something I *don't* expect," Thistlethorn snorted. Shimmerpaw sadly went limp, disappointment striking her gaze. Thistlethorn felt slight sympathy for her apprentice. The brown, black spotted apprentice was just appointed that day, anyway.

Out of nowhere, Shimmerpaw thrashed back, swatting at Thistlethorn's nose and face, stunning her. She rolled back into a defensive position, smiling at herself. "Like that?" she panted.

"Kind of," Thistlethorn answered, dragging her paw over the fur Shimmerpaw had affected to groom. "But you still have a lot to learn." Shimmerpaw charged again; this time dipping under Thistlethorn's belly. As she emerged out of belly fur, Thistlethorn clutched her teeth around the apprentice's scruff.

Shimmerpaw started squealing like what reminded Thistlethorn of a kit. She started to writhe around again, uncontrollably swinging her paws at every place she could. Thistlethorn could already tell Shimmerpaw was going to do some other move by how unnatural she seemed. Shimmerpaw pummeled her face again, hoping to break free.

The spotted apprentice ended up climbing on Thistlethorn's back, struggling to balance. Thistlethorn stopped herself from using the crush move, the same warning she heard before repeating in her head. Just as she was fighting the urge to use all of her knowledge, something sharp pricked her.

Thistlethorn winced, a pang of confusion jolting through her. She then realized Shimmerpaw had unsheathed her claws, tearing at her skin. Thistlethorn separated her jaws to scold her apprentice, but she halted herself. *What's so bad about unsheathing claws?* But something cautioned Thistlethorn not to respond by doing the same. She feared the worst. *If I did, Whitestar would probably re-assign Shimmerpaw to another cat. Even worse, I may not be allowed to gain another apprentice.*

She started to clench her teeth together from the claws that tore at her flesh. She fell back with great force, shocking Shimmerpaw. Shimmerpaw was barely able to escape, her fur on end.

"How about I teach you some actual battle moves?" Thistlethorn prompted. Shimmerpaw nodded vigorously in response, pouncing around the Training Clearing with excitement.

Thistlethorn darted towards Shimmerpaw, clasping her hind leg inside of her jaws. She hurled her apprentice around, Shimmerpaw exhibiting a *mrrow* of surprise. Thistlethorn paused her attack.

"By grasping your opponent's back leg, you can flip them over and

deal some pretty nasty wounds," Thistlethorn tutored. Shimmerpaw bounced ecstatically as she arranged back onto four legs.

"Can I try?" Shimmerpaw urged Thistlethorn despite her exhausted look. *If she's up for it.* Thistlethorn examined her apprentice quickly. Shimmerpaw panted and sucked in large breaths, but her tail trembled with extra energy like a large tree being yanked different directions in a windstorm.

"Yes," Thistlethorn replied. Shimmerpaw hunkered into a pounce, leaping straight towards Thistlethorn. She abruptly changed directions, lunging here and there around Thistlethorn's body. Thistlethorn shifted her gaze to follow the apprentice, waiting for a right time to hop and pin down her apprentice.

What in StarClan is she even doing? The move that Shimmerpaw seemed to be performing only slowed her down. The black-spotted apprentice suddenly dipped under her mentor's underbelly, aiming for Thistlethorn's hind leg, jaws separated and front legs outstretched. Thistlethorn started to flick around and made an effort to catch her apprentice, who suddenly gripped what she was striving for.

Thistlethorn was lurched back, but she could tell Shimmerpaw wasn't using enough strength to bowl her over. She deviated from her apprentice's grip, throwing the brown, black spotted apprentice a different direction. "You need to use all of your strength," Thistlethorn instructed. *At least we're getting somewhere.*

"I am!" Shimmerpaw hissed, her tail starting to twitch indignantly. She hurled herself back towards Thistlethorn, this time bouncing around and doing some unusual move Thistlethorn couldn't identify. She rolled over multiple times, Thistlethorn reeling her gaze around to follow her apprentice. *It's another distraction.*

Thistlethorn launched herself towards the dapple-pelted apprentice, pushing her back by the flank. Shimmerpaw darted another way, fixing her surveying optics onto Thistlethorn's head. She circled around the robust she-cat, sweeping around every corner of the brown and black warrior's body. *This again?* Thistlethorn easily turned, a bit of irritation striking her expression.

Shimmerpaw then fixed her gaze back onto her mentor's head. She suddenly soared back towards the she-cat, and as her opponent bunched her muscles and readied herself to use defensive moves, she veered a different direction. Determined, she swiftly grasped the sinewy brown and black she-cat's hind leg in her jaws. With a struggling grunt, she started to strenuously unbalance the she-cat.

Thistlethorn jerked her hind leg back, trying to release Shimmerpaw's grip. But Shimmerpaw wouldn't budge. The spotted apprentice, her teeth aching and muscles screaming with pain, was able to flip her mentor over. She cheered out in her victory.

"I knew you were coming," Thistlethorn started to praise. "And you were able to use the strategy on me. You should be able to catch another cat off guard with that move." Shimmerpaw squealed out with excitement at her mentor's complement. "But you still haven't perfected it," Thistlethorn continued. "There's a lot more for you to learn."

Shimmerpaw gazed warmly up at her mentor. Thistlethorn felt something new. No cat ever seemed to truly look up to her. *I guess this is what Squirrelchase had talked about when he spoke of an "apprentice and mentor's bond."* She rested her tail on Shimmerpaw's shoulder. "Come on," Thistlethorn started. "We should head back."

Thistlethorn anticipated a whining protest from Shimmerpaw, but instead she received a proud nod from the new apprentice. The two ShadowClan members hurried back through the forest, avoiding bramble thickets, arrangements of leaves and pine needles, and swerved away from the grasps of variants of trees.

Shimmerpaw, despite her exhausted look, seemed like she had an endless supply of energy. She pelted through the groves of trees, thrusting herself over tree stumps and other obstacles. Thistlethorn made sure to keep behind her apprentice, keeping watchful eyes to make sure the black-spotted she-cat wouldn't trip and injure herself.

The aroma of ShadowClan grew stronger and flooded Thistlethorn's nostrils. She and her apprentice started to excurse through the last suburbs of ShadowClan's camp, closing in to the heart of the territory. Shimmerpaw skidded to a halt, followed by her mentor.

Eaglefeather, Greywing, and Weedtail slid past the two, carefully padding out to the depths of the pine forest.

Shimmerpaw shuffled past and squeezed through the barrier, followed by her mentor. Pinewhisker waited on the other side, his expression interested.

"How was it?" Pinewhisker asked, his voice more curious than demanding. Shimmerpaw and Thistlethorn exchanged glances.

"It was great!" Shimmerpaw exclaimed excitedly, tearing at blades of grass to spew out her energy. Pinewhisker smiled in an exaggerated way that warriors usually do when communicating with kits or young apprentices. Shimmerpaw didn't seem to notice. ShadowClan's deputy then shifted his focus to Thistlethorn.

"It went pretty well," Thistlethorn responded. "I gave her a tour of the forest, taught her a battle move.. I'm surprised she's not completely energy-deprived yet." Pinewhisker suppressed a small chuckle.

"Well, be sure to get some rest," Pinewhisker mewed. He lifted his tail to reveal the fresh-kill pile. "Help yourselves to some prey." Thistlethorn gave the ShadowClan deputy a gracious dip of her head, making her way further into the clearing.

"Wait until Shadepaw and Maplepaw hear about this!" Shimmerpaw gasped, half to herself. She darted to the fresh-kill pile, dragging out a remarkably large squirrel. Thistlethorn padded up behind her. *That squirrel is humongous. I don't even know how she'll eat that.*

Shimmerpaw prodded the fresh-kill squirrel over to Thistlethorn. "Here," she offered. "We'll share."

"Er, thanks," Thistlethorn replied. She and her apprentice crouched down, each taking small bites of the squirrel. *It's rare to find such good catches during the middle of leaf-fall.* She and her apprentice both finished off the fresh-kill, licking their lips with satisfaction after their scrumptious meal.

Maybe this is my chance to redeem myself...

// Chapter Twenty

The thought of his fellow apprentice's death haunted Silverpaw. The silver tabby apprentice was sharing a fresh-kill wren with his brother, Duskpaw. Even though the battle with rogues had occurred three moons ago, it had still been in the back of Silverpaw's mind. *Why would Lakestar of sent two new apprentices to battle? I would've happily fought for my Clan.*

Should Silverpaw of been mad at his leader? He didn't know. He took a bite around the wren's flank, licking his lips as the savory flavor absorbed on his tongue. His brother took a nibble after him, before lifting his head.

"The hunting patrols made some pretty lucky catches today," Duskpaw remarked. Silverpaw nodded.

Volefoot padded up beside Silverpaw and Duskpaw. He blinked, asking, "Would you two and and Rosefern like to go on evening patrol later?"

Better than nothing. "Sure," Silverpaw answered. He stammered onto his paws, disposing the wren's remains. He shook his pelt, nipping at some straw in his pelt. He gaped his jaws in a yawn.

Before Silverpaw could start towards his den, an agonized yowl split the air. It was close. Silverpaw's ears went flat on his head. *What happened?* His question didn't take long to be answered. Rogues stormed into the camp with determined and bloodthirsty expressions; their claws outstretched. Silverpaw didn't wait for his mentors call as he unsheathed his claws and slashed at a brown she-cat's throat as she leaped at him. He was unsuccessful as the she-cat bounded back, retaliating with a swift unsheathed claw aimed towards Silverpaw's shoulder.

Silverpaw winced with pain as his opponent afflicted his shoulder blade. As he threw the she-cat back with all his might, he gasped with shock as one of the rogues met his eye. *No.* It wasn't a rogue.

Yarrowpaw! She led the rogues here! But why? Silverpaw realized Yarrowpaw had acted different since the first rogue battle. *Of course... she wants revenge because of her sisters death!*

Silverpaw felt a charge of energy run through him. *I won't let her!* The brown she-cat he was fighting lunged back toward him with a furious hiss. Duskpaw joined him, fastening his jaws onto the brawny she-cat's spine. He was hurled back, almost losing his grip. Duskpaw latched onto the rogue's face, his muzzle wrinkled up with fury.

Painful and defiant screeches rung around the ThunderClan clearing. Silverpaw counted at least eight rogues; there were more than the prior battle. He felt a feeling of doubt snap through him. *Will we win?* The silver tabby apprentice surged with determination and rage. He dug his claws into the large rogue's back, dealing dirty wounds.

Duskpaw crashed into the dirt, his belly exposed. Silverpaw froze as the brown she-cat under his paws neared her claws toward the dusty apprentice. *Brother, I will save you!* Silverpaw hurled himself at the she-cat's scruff, kicking her face and trying to knock her off her balance. The brown rogue responded with an enraged growl, Duskpaw scrambling onto his paws. Silverpaw felt a sliver of relief dash through him.

Silverpaw was jolted into the air by the yellow-eyed rogue as he tried climbing back onto her back. He screeched with surprise, pain racing through him as the brown she-cat's claws raked across his flank. The stench of blood spewed into the air, making ThunderClan's camp unrecognizable. Duskpaw nipped at the lithe she-cat's neck, tearing at her ear.

Silverpaw, groaning in pain, forced himself onto his paws and wrenched back towards the rogue. The brown she-cat veered around, and Silverpaw secured his claws into her muzzle. Silverpaw aimed for her eye; but stopped as he almost lost his grip as he was being thrashed around by the large she-cat. He shuttered with terror as he was almost propelled into a large oak that probably could've snapped several of his bones.

Just as the silver apprentice was about flung off, a black tabby tom charged at the brown she-cat. Silverpaw recognized Wolfspirit, Dawnpaw's former mentor. Silverpaw held his grasp; a bit of relief pacing through him. "Ivy, watch out!" Yarrowpaw's warning rang. Her optics glistened with livid emotions for Wolfspirit.

Just as Silverpaw thought he would be free, Yarrowpaw fixed her claws into Wolfspirit's shoulder, dealing a harsh blemish to his jaw. The faded ginger she-cat was flanked by a blue-gray tom, who joined in on Wolfspirit's attack. Silverpaw thrusted himself off of Ivy's muzzle, rushing over to assist. Duskpaw also escaped, fending off Ivy by hitting her blows back. *Should I help him?*

Silverpaw didn't know who to attack. He made the choice to assist his brother, dipping under Ivy's belly and wrapping his jaws around her hind leg. But Ivy was too large for the apprentice. She fell towards the ground, Silverpaw barely escaping. While Silverpaw was still stunned, Ivy pelted towards him with a fierce yowl.

Duskpaw darted in front of Ivy, dragging his claws across the she-cat's chest. Ivy stammered back, only to charge back. Silverpaw arranged back onto his paws, alerted by the agonized howling of Wolfspirit. He was covered in wounds. Yarrowpaw ambled towards him, a bloodthirsty smile cut across her muzzle.

Silverpaw's heart lurched, and he burst towards Yarrowpaw, clasping her tail in his jaws. Yarrowpaw stifled an irritated hiss, whirling around and clawing Silverpaw's nose. Silverpaw stumbled back in pain, horror drowning his feelings as he heard a deathly scream from Wolfspirit. Blood poured from his neck as he crashed onto the ground. *No!*

Silverpaw's pupils darted around as he searched for Duskpaw. Bitter and sorrowful feelings were placed on his tongue. Fuming, he placed his gaze toward Yarrowpaw as Pond and Ivy bounded away to clash with other warriors. Silverpaw scrambled onto his paws and galloped toward her, eyes scorching. He raked his claws across Yarrowpaw's chest.

Yarrowpaw barely flinched. She batted Silverpaw on the ear with sheathed claws, taunting the silver tabby tom. She pinned him to

the ground while unsheathing her claws, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction. Silverpaw wriggled frantically under the yellow she-cat, gasping for air. *This... can't... be... happening!*

"You see?" Yarrowpaw snorted. "There's just no escaping us. You promise *so* much, but give so little. I thought ThunderClan was so honored and loyal, so courageous? But where are you now? You're all as corrupt as the villains that lived generations ago. And if the most 'loyal' Clan turns out to be the most crooked, then what other lies have we been told?"

"You.. won't... win," Silverpaw choked.

"It's not winning," Yarrowpaw hissed. "It's *revenge*."

Silverpaw's lungs demanded air. He suddenly started whipped around profusely again, Yarrowpaw shaking her head and clicking her tongue with disappointment. "I thought maybe *you* would understand," she sighed. "But I guess you're just going to watch your Clan sink to ruin from StarClan." *No! StarClan, no!*

Suddenly, as if StarClan had responded, Silverpaw was able to throw the faded ginger she-cat off him. With a gasp for breath, he sliced his claws across Yarrowpaw's nose. Yarrowpaw went limp for a few heartbeats; her body motionless as she slammed against a rock. *She's unconscious!* Silverpaw, boiling with rage, severed a scar along the faded ginger she-cat's face.

Out of nowhere, Yarrowpaw awoke, flinching from pain. She was exposed to another blow from Silverpaw, before he was torn away by a black she-cat. Duskpaw suddenly appeared, guiding Hazelpaw onto his paws. His eyes were swallowed with terror as he saw Silverpaw being hurled back towards the oak he feared impact from.

Silverpaw slammed into the tree, his head growing woozy. *Must.. fight..*

// Chapter Twenty One

The sound of the fray rung in his ears. His reality circled around, blurred by a smog-like haze. His strength was so little he could hardly process any thought. Pain swept down his back like the talon of an eagle had struck it. His blood dampened the ground, and his breathing grew labored. He closed his eyes, trying to block out the visions and audio of the forest around him.

"Silverpaw!" a voice hollered through the defiant hisses and spits of clashing warriors. "Silverpaw!" the voice repeated.

Memories started flooding back into Silverpaw's head. First the battle where Dawnpaw was killed; and then he remembered the attack Yarrowpaw had started. Realization swept through his mind, backed up by rage and determination. *I can't let her destroy us.*

A weary, panting warrior limped over towards the limp silver tabby. As he grew closer, Silverpaw immediately recognized his scent. *D-Duskpaw..*

"Are you okay?" Duskpaw gasped, sitting down and arranging next to Silverpaw, his optics glistening with concern.

Silverpaw carefully peered open his eyes. Duskpaw pressed on his body, searching for any wounded spots or broken bones. His breathing softened, and he seemed to flood with relief. Silverpaw lifted his gaze and rested it onto Duskpaw.

"How long was I unconscious?" Silverpaw asked, his voice shaky and still shocked.

"Not long," Duskpaw answered reassuringly, assisting Silverpaw onto his paws. "Thank StarClan you didn't break any bones.."

Silverpaw nodded, gathering himself onto four paws. *Not every cat is so lucky.* He froze with horror. Sunflower, with agony in her eyes, drug Thornbranch across the clearing. Claw marks were chiseled all

over his body, layered with blood. The crimson liquid welled at his throat, marking the death blow. Silverpaw's fur bristled and his tongue went bitter. *H-how dare Yarrowpaw? She's betraying the cats she knew and loved her whole life!*

Some cats were too distracted to even take one shocked look at the grey and brown tabby tom as they fought the brutal rogues. Silverpaw went stiff again as he noticed two rogues, one a ginger tabby and a brown tabby fighting at the nursery to reach Tanglefrost and her litter of kits, Snakekit, Beetlekit, Batkit, and Aspenkit. Despite Tanglefrost being deputy, she had given her role of assigning patrols to Volefoot. Silverpaw bolted over, fuming with rage.

Silverpaw lunged for the ginger tabby she-cat, fastening his jaws hard on her neck. The she-cat stammered back, dragging her claws across his flank. She knocked Silverpaw off of his paws, causing him a small *mrrow* of surprise. She used the same ruthless move she had dealt to Duskpaw as she flipped the silver tabby over.

But Silverpaw was prepared. He blocked the she-cat's next blow, dipping under her side and slicing her belly. The ginger tabby stifled a small howl of pain, gripping Silverpaw by the scruff. She shook him around like crow-food. Silverpaw wriggled around, eventually slashing the she-cat's nose. He was able to escape, crashing against the ground and scrambling onto four paws.

The tabby had bounded towards the nursery, shoving past Tanglefrost. Eaglecloud gripped the brown tom's head, hurling him over to crash into the she-cat. Silverpaw pelted over to Tanglefrost; his eyes gleaming with dread.

Tanglefrost was limp, her breathing shallow and fur matted and laced with blood. She glanced at Silverpaw with great wisdom, as if she already knew she was on her way to StarClan. *No! W-we can't lose you!*

"Tanglefrost.." Silverpaw squeaked. "Please.." he continued, not being able to finish his sentence, the words getting caught in his throat. Tanglefrost lifted her twinkling gaze. *You're dying! How can you be so excited? Y-you won't be able to see your kits! You-*

"StarClan is ready for me," the ThunderClan deputy mewed, her voice quiet but brimmed with knowledge. "I see great futures for you, young Silverpaw. I hope to watch you grow to a great warrior from Silverpelt."

Silverpaw didn't know what to say. The brown and white ThunderClan deputy had one last phrase she requested, "Please, save my kits. Their destinies are far greater than mine." After that, the she-cat's eyes slowly closed, and her body went completely stiff.

Please, save my kits. Their destinies are far greater than mine. The words repeated in Silverpaw's mind. His anger and sorrow growing, he veered around and latched his claws onto the brown tabby. Fury cascaded through his veins as he used all of his strength to keep up with the tom. The tom lashed out with unsheathed claws, slashing them across Silverpaw's spine.

Silverpaw retaliated with a gash to the tom's muzzle, kicking with great force at his chest. He fell back, twisting around onto four paws before making another leap. He didn't mind the pain that split through his body as his blood dribbled onto the ground. He tried to imagine the amount of agony Tanglefrost and Thornbranch had gone through, persuading himself that they must've passed through worse things than him while dying. But those thoughts were faint as he was burdened with the battle, launching unsheathed claws toward the tom again.

He was flung back by the rogue, determination still flooding inside of him. He reached out, grappling the tom's flesh again before he could land on the ground. He nibbled at the tabby's scruff, fury roaring through him. He paused his attack as a cry rung through his ears. Eaglecloud seemed to just have noticed Tanglefrost's still body, and while he was distracted, the ginger she-cat chiseled a crimson line along his lower neck.

Just like the she-cat had done, the brown tabby barged past Silverpaw. Silverpaw responded by climbing onto the tom's back and dealing harsh wounds. *I must keep him from the kits!* Beetlekit, Snakekit, Batkit, and Aspenkit cowered behind Eaglecloud's legs. Eaglecloud had a half-closed eye, blood welling up from his eyelids. The she-cat strategically swung under the ThunderClan medicine

cat, her claws nearing towards Aspenkit.

Eaglecloud, his optics illuminating with fear and fury, fastened his claws into the she-cat's shoulders. He bowled her over, emerging into a violent cyclone of fur.

Silverpaw was required to keep his vision reeled onto his opponent, dodging blows and dealing them back. He slashed the tom across his shoulder, rolling around and swiftly gripping its back leg in his jaws. He kept the rogue's leg clamped in his jaws, the blood in his ears roaring. The broad tabby's hind leg made a strong lurch, almost throwing Silverpaw off.

Silverpaw froze in fear as he saw Eaglecloud even more weakened. He was then hurled away by his opponent. He furiously drilled his claws into the ground as the tom joined with the she-cat in the fray against the ThunderClan medicine cat. Beetlekit, flanked by his siblings, scooped collections of stalks of grass and piles of dirt out of the nursery ground. He, shuttering, signaled his littermates to crawl inside.

Silverpaw readied himself to pounce, aiming at the tom's back. Eaglecloud was growing weaker, but his optics still gleamed with determination. Worry struck Silverpaw's gaze. *Is this the end?* He shook his head of dubious thoughts, launching himself off of the earth and towards the broad-shouldered tom.

The tom winced in a small twinge of pain, swinging around with mighty force. Silverpaw rolled off of the tom, swiftly blemishing skin sewn onto his belly. The tom gritted his teeth together, a sneer sounding from his jaws. He went limp, almost crushing his attacker. Silverpaw was able to wriggle out of the tom's grip, before twisting around and crashing his weight into his enemy's.

A cry erupted into the air. Snakekit was snatched away by the ginger she-cat, whimpering in distress. His siblings watched with terror, Eaglecloud still shielding them. The ThunderClan medicine cat yowled, "Snakekit is being kidnapped!" He stammered back into a dominant posture, the brown tabby stomping towards him. He peered beside every single corner of the tabby to try and fetch Snakekit, intimidation striking his gaze.

Silverpaw's head swung different directions, scanning on where to go. The ginger tabby she-cat that held Snakekit was like a flash of lightning, swerving around at any obstacle. Rosefern pelted towards her, her eyes illuminating with fury.

A painful howl came from Eaglecloud's jaws as claws raked across his flank. At that, Silverpaw leaped towards and sunk his claws into the brown tabby rogue's back, nipping and clawing furiously at its flesh. *No more lives can be taken from ThunderClan!* His thought reminded him of Tanglefrost and Thornbranch. The memories tugged at his heart, as long as fueled his anger. Eaglecloud dealt a slash of his claws to the rogue's shoulder, before aiming for its neck. The tom protected himself from the death blow with great force, knocking the ThunderClan medicine cat back a tail-length. Silverpaw could not fathom how the grey and black medicine cat was still standing on four paws with the amount of wounds that struck his body.

"Hold on!" Silverpaw breathed, dragging his claws along the top of the rogue's head. The brown tabby's attention was then reeled on the silver apprentice. He jerked back, almost knocking Silverpaw off of his paws. *Sometimes I wish I wasn't still an apprentice!*

"Thank you," Eaglecloud's voice rasped. "Your courage is honored."

Silverpaw didn't respond. His muscles burned. He probably pulled a couple. Pain washed over his senses as his grip loosened and sharp, talon-like claws sliced his nose. Blood poured from the wound. *It's only a blow to the nose,* Silverpaw convinced himself as he clenched his teeth together from the pain. He thrashed around, placing his claws wherever he could to prevent himself from falling.

Duskpaw came to back him up. He swept his paws under the rogue's front legs, tripping him. Silverpaw had a flare of relief build inside him at his brother's arrival. He was able to grip somewhere along the tabby rogue's spine.

His vision was blurred with fur and claws, but he was able to keep decent coordination on where he struck his opponent. In the corner of his eye he could see Eaglecloud's battered pelt escorting Beetlekit, Batkit, and Aspenkit out of an opening they carved at the

back of the nursery. After that, Silverpaw and his brother seemed to both be making an effort to keep the rogue's attention away from the other four figures.

Silverpaw thought it would never happen. But it did. The rogue flung him and his brother off of his broad body, bolting off in a cowardly pace. Other rogues seemed to be in a panic, Silverpaw noticed, as he reluctantly exited the nursery. Duskpaw flanked him. Volefoot had led RiverClan warriors into the camp to participate in the battle. It seemed they were doing well.

A screech seized the air, followed by a large crack. A white rogue slammed against a large oak, Sunflower gazing with fury behind him. His body went still. "Clouded Sky!" a silver tabby tom screeched. Weak ThunderClan and RiverClan warriors surrounded limping rogues. Silverpaw's heart suddenly lurched with sorrow. He saw the ginger tabby she-cat. *But no Snakekit.*

A panting Rosefern's optics were damp with tears. *He's gone?*

"Come on!" Yarrowpaw hissed from the top of an oak's branch. "What are you waiting for?"

A large black and brown tortoiseshell tom lifted his head, eyes scorching with rage. "We've lost," he snarled. "Because of you." Yarrowpaw boiled with anger. She gaped her jaws to speak, but she was interrupted by Lakestar who stood at the top of the Quarterstone.

"You have lost," Lakestar sneered, his voice barren of any empathy towards his daughter. But that didn't mean it wasn't laced with pain.

We won... but at a great cost. The ThunderClan and RiverClan warriors neared closer to trap the rogues, their eyes blazing. Heartbeats passed of uneasiness clenching Silverpaw and Duskpaw's rib cage. Heavy breathing came from both the wounded ThunderClan warriors and the rogues.

"Escort them out," Lakestar hissed, cocking his head to stare at Volefoot, Ratfang, Sootbreeze, and Wolfspirit. Horror enveloped

Silverpaw as he noticed three new figures both slain, their bodies laying in the heart of the clearing: Toadpuddle, Weaselface, Hazelpaw, and Snailface. He shuddered as he noticed Snailface. *He was an elder! H-HOW DARE THEY? They took a kit and an elder's life!*

Rosefern placed her gaze onto Snailface's unmoving pelt, her eyes laced with despair. *He was her father..*

"Forgotten about me?" Yarrowpaw mocked, flexing her claws from on top of her branch of the oak. "Those fox-hearts are gone. Oh, I care SO MUCH." She lunged from the oak, perfectly placing her paws onto the Quarterstone where Lakestar stood.

Silverpaw's coat stood on end. He felt the need to help, about to pelt over, but was blocked by Duskpaw's calming tail. "Lakestar will handle her," his brother whispered. "You've already done a lot. *We* have."

Silverpaw grunted in response, watching the scene that unfolded before him. Yarrowpaw seemed to shake off every ache and pain that seized her body. She ambled towards the ThunderClan leader.

"Skunk-pelt," Lakestar growled. He waited for Yarrowpaw's move, tensing his muscles and unsheathing his claws.

"Dawnpaw died because of you," Yarrowpaw snorted, her voice holding agony at its core. "Are you proud? Your own daughter. And now everything you've done has come back to bite you." Silverpaw's neck fur went completely upright. *This does not sound good, AT ALL.*

Before Silverpaw could predict it, Yarrowpaw ascended towards the immense leader. Lakestar charged toward the faded ginger figure, his teeth bared. Yarrowpaw suddenly veered a different direction, launching herself from a magnolia tree that stood at the back of the Quarterstone. She dipped under Lakestar's belly, dealing a pretty nasty wound.

But Silverpaw noticed it must've been a distraction. Yarrowpaw swiftly dashed from the tom as he tried to crash his weight onto hers. As Lakestar's jaws neared her scruff in retaliation, Yarrowpaw flawlessly slashed her barbaric claws across his throat. Silverpaw

went stiff with terror. Lakestar choked with pain, his optics widening with horror at his loss. Yarrowpaw thrusted her legs into his side, knocking him off of the Quarterstone as he was losing a life. *T-that fast?*

The ThunderClan leader's eyelids suddenly flashed back open after closing, and before he could even take one breath, an outstretched spike of rock opened his wound on his belly and stained the Quarterstone with blood. Silverpaw cried out with disbelief and horror. ThunderClan cats milled around camp, a battered Eaglecloud trying to find at least one herb to assist Lakestar. *Could StarClan even heal a wound that large?*

Eaglecloud placed a plethora of herb poultice on Lakestar's belly to stop infection, his gaze glowing with concern. Silverpaw was still radiating with shock; he could barely process what was happening.

While all this was occuring, Yarrowpaw was still gloating over her victory. "We need to get out of here!" a RiverClan warrior howled. Others agreed with her, but as they tried to shuffle towards the entrance, Yarrowpaw hurled a large branch in front of it. A villainous snicker came from her jaws.

Rosefern padded over, her gaze flooded with sorrow. She climbed the Quarterstone, puffing out her chest. Other warriors bowed their heads in honor of her bravery. *N-no.. please, you'll die..*

Silverpaw couldn't prevent it. Yarrowpaw and her mother started to brawl with great brutality. Silverpaw could barely detect what was happening. He could spot Yarrowpaw raking her claws along Rosefern's chest, spitting furiously. Rosefern lashed back, her eyes still brimmed with despair.

Silverpaw's head dashed around, trying to spot who was doing what. Duskpaw's pelt shivered next to his, eyes gleaming with terror. Rosefern's ear was torn by Yarrowpaw's ruthless blow, her limbs weakening. *ThunderClan is going to lose another. If we can even call it a Clan anymore. Its deputy is dead, and possibly Lakestar's lives have all been swept away too.*

But suddenly, the unthinkable happened. Rosefern's jaws fastened

around Yarrowpaw's neck. Yarrowpaw was also being pinned down by the tortoiseshell she-cat as a failsafe, the tortoiseshell's claws pressing hard on her chest. Yarrowpaw's gaze flashed with a mixture of terror, disbelief, and fear. Her body violently jerked around, trying to escape Rosefern's jaws that were latched around her throat. But it didn't seem to work. Every effort, every move failed that Yarrowpaw attempted. After all that, it didn't take a leader to defeat her, but her own mother.

Yarrowpaw's body then went completely limp. She may of been dead, but ThunderClan was still permanently dented. The clearing went dead silent.

Suddenly, Lakestar gasped for breath. His eyes drowsily opened, and his breathing heaved in his lungs. Relief washed over Silverpaw. Some warriors were granting ThunderClan's leader expressions of concern and relief, while some were cold. *Wait. Lakestar caused this all, didn't he?* Silverpaw reluctantly backed away from the leader.

"This was your fault!" Rosefern cried, voice laced with torment, still lingering over Yarrowpaw's corpse. "Our daughters are dead because of you."

Lakestar was still too weak to completely process what his mate spoke of, but he still heard it. "Sh..she chose to attack us," he countered in a small gasp for air. Eaglecloud calmed him, but his eyes were secretly clouded with resentment. *It was Lakestar's fault, wasn't it?*

"WHAT IN STARCLAN MADE YOU SEND DAWNPAW AND YARROWPAW TO BATTLE?" Rosefern demanded.

Lakestar responded in a sluggish groan. Rosefern's tail lashed.

"HUH?" she yowled.

Eaglecloud lifted his head from attending Lakestar. "Let's settle this another time," he hissed. "Being at each other's throats right now isn't going to help anything." Rosefern didn't reply, but she seemed to obey him. She moved her gaze to the middle of the clearing,

shuddering as she saw the bodies again. *Great StarClan... how could this of ever been worse?*

Duskpaw, who recently was made Rosefern's apprentice after his former mentor Sleekfur's death, went to comfort the tortoiseshell she-cat. Silverpaw had an extremely bad feeling inside of his stomach. His Clan had been torn to shreds. Ratfang dragged Tanglefrost's body across the ground, agony in his gaze.

Sometimes, Silverpaw doubted StarClan when things went wrong. But this time, the feeling was extreme. The bad feeling grew stronger, but Silverpaw couldn't shake his doubts of StarClan. Would it be dangerous for him to lose faith? One thought went, *what are you thinking? Of course they're real!* Another went, *how come they let these many cats die in this battle? They must not be real, or severely lack power.*

ThunderClan cats dipped their heads in mourn and sadness. Many shuffled around camp in a panicked mess. Eaglecloud was in deep concentration over healing Lakestar. He called Wolfspirit and Wasptail over to help him carry Lakestar's body to his den. "ThunderClan will never be itself again," Silverpaw murmured. "Will it?"

// Chapter Twenty Two

Wetkit's tail excitedly twitched behind her, elated squeaks coming from her jaws. "It's time! It's time!" she squealed. She seemed to bump into every obstacle placed inside of the nursery, until eventually she rammed into her brother.

"Watch where you put your paws," Weedkit snapped, his tail bristling out defensively. Wetkit gaped her jaws in a hiss, whisking around and padding towards her mother.

Smallpelt carefully groomed Snowkit's neck fur, lifting her gaze as she noticed Wetkit travelling over. Wetkit bounded over, enthused, and her pelt bristling ecstatically. *It's really time! It's really, really time!*

"I'm going to become an apprentice!" Wetkit exclaimed, her light blue eyes bubbling with excitement. Smallpelt viewed the light gray she-cat, her expression loving. Snowkit's elated expression grew even stronger as she noticed her littermate.

"Yes, dear," Smallpelt mewed softly, a smile carving across her face. "I'm very proud of all of you." Weedkit padded up beside Wetkit. Smallpelt released her grip from Snowkit, and the white she-kit stumbled out of her grasp.

Snowkit's fur was stroked up from her mother's grooming. Wetkit chuckled. It was barely dawn, however Smallpelt's kits were already trembling with excitement for their ceremony. They all bounced around the nursery with excitement roaring through their veins.... well, most of them. Weedkit stayed under the overhang of the nursery, rolling his eyes and carefully stroking his tongue over his paw.

"Is it time yet?" Wetkit whined impatiently. Weedkit shot her a narrowed-eye look.

"Only a bit longer," Smallpelt responded softly, shaking out her pelt

and arising from her nest. "Some cats already seem awake."

"Let's go!" Snowkit urged, her fur bristling and tail quivering vigorously. "Let's go out to the clearing!" Smallpelt nodded in agreement, her gaze reflecting with sorrow and love for her three kits. Wetkit hastily straightened her fur with careful licks. *I must look perfect when I go out there!*

Weedkit exhibited squinted eyes, his tail respectfully floating into the air. Wetkit copied, her tail curling elegantly and extravagantly padding towards the clearing. Snowkit was doing the opposite, practically tripping over herself. As they emerged into the glade, many warriors pointed with their tails towards them. In particular, the other apprentices were the most enthusiastic.

Sharkpaw was bouncing up and down. Wetkit realized the black and white she-cat's gaze was fixed on her. As she was about to gape her jaws to greet the she-cat, a figure rammed into her. She was thrown to the ground, earth littering her pelt. She recognized Snowkit, who's expression was apologetic.

"HEY!" Wetkit screeched, anger reflecting in her eyes.

"Sorry!" Snowkit squeaked, her voice guilty. Wetkit stammered onto all of her feet, a growl suppressing inside of her. "Sorry!" Snowkit repeated, her ears pinning back to her head.

"Watch where you're going," Wetkit growled, sifting through her pelt to expel any specks of soil. Smallpelt came behind her three kits, her teeth clenching together with concern.

"Come on," Smallpelt ordered to Wetkit. "We need to clean you up." *I can clean myself up!* Frustration boiled inside of Wetkit. She felt Smallpelt's jaws clamp around her scruff, hauling her into the air and back towards the nursery.

The familiar nursery scent flowed into Wetkit's nostrils. She spotted Lilypond, who seemed to have not spoken a word before, quietly sat in the corner. Her belly was plump enough where her kits would definitely come in the next moon, Wetkit noticed.

"Congratulations," Lilypond meowed half-hoarsely. She noticed Wetkit, whose coat was cluttered with soil. Her expression changed to a confused look. "Er.. what happened?"

Smallpelt laid Wetkit into a moss nest. "Snowkit bumped into me and pushed me over!" Wetkit hissed. "Now I might miss my ceremony!"

Lilypond blinked. "I'm sure it was an accident," she responded, her voice soft and honest. "You shouldn't hold a grudge against her. It's important you have a tight bond with your siblings." The brown and white she-cat seemed to be holding back a twinge of sorrow. Wetkit felt slightly ashamed. *Weedkit barely talks to me anymore. I don't want Snowkit to do the same.*

Wetkit grew irritated as she felt Smallpelt's tongue stroke her fur. She gaped her jaws to protest, but her resentful messages were muffled. She noticed her mother's licks were rapid. She already felt like she could see cats clustering together for her ceremony. *I can't miss it!* She squirmed, trying to free herself from Smallpelt's grip.

"Stay still," Smallpelt scolded before returning to groom Wetkit.

"I can't miss my ceremony!" Wetkit gasped, wriggling around defiantly.

Lilypond watched awkwardly. "You won't!" Smallpelt protested. Wetkit then heard Lightstar's call.

"Let all cats old enough swim gather to hear my words!" the call went. Wetkit's heart lurched. She burst out of her mother's grip, galloping into the clearing.

"He won't start it without you!" Smallpelt insisted. The dark grey she-cat's voice was almost deaf to Wetkit's ears. Wetkit bolted further, skidding to an abrupt halt beside Snowkit. After arranging into a sitting position, he quickly skimmed her fur for any specks of earth. *Whew.*

"Sorry..." Snowkit whispered again. Wetkit grunted in response, quickly licking her chest. Smallpelt organized herself next to her

kits, sorrow and love reflecting in her optics.

"Today, we will honor three kits," Lightstar spoke. He lowered his head, fixing his gaze on Weedkit as he stood on the tree stump. Weedkit took a step forward, his gaze brimmed with honor. *How come he gets apprenticed first?* "Weedkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and the time has come for you to be apprenticed," the RiverClan leader continued. "From this day on, until you earn your warrior name, you shall be known as Weedpaw. Your mentor will be Creekmist." *The DEPUTY is his mentor?*

Lightstar craned his head to Creekmist. "Creekmist, you have served this Clan greatly as its deputy. You had received excellent training from Spruceclaw, and you have shown yourself to be brave and swift. You will be the mentor of Weedpaw; and I expect you to pass on all of your knowledge to him."

Creekmist's eyes gleamed with pride as he dashed over to meet noses with Weedpaw. "Lightstar?" Wetkit spoke out. Smallpelt froze.

"Wetkit, stop!" Smallpelt ordered, shock laced in her voice.

"Doesn't Creekmist have other things to do, like assigning patrols?" Wetkit inquired. "How come he will have time to mentor an apprentice?"

Smallpelt placed her tail in front of Wetkit's jaws, the light grey she-kit's messages becoming incoherent. Lightstar awkwardly started to broadcast his voice again.

"Snowkit, you have also reached the age of six moons, and your time to be apprenticed has come," Lightstar mewed. *Of course you're mentoring Snowkit before me!"* "From this day on, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Snowpaw. Thunderfoot shall mentor you," the leader went on, fixing his gaze onto Snowpaw's mentor. "Thunderfoot, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Troutstream, and you have shown yourself to be strong and courageous. You shall be the mentor of Snowpaw; and I expect you to pass on all of your knowledge to her."

Snowpaw bounded up to her mentor and met noses, her fur bristling excitedly. *Now it's my turn!* "And finally," Lightstar meowed. "Wetkit, you have reached the age of six moons, which means the time has come for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Wetpaw. Snakestrike will be your mentor," he announced, turning his head to Snakestrike. "Snakestrike, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Rubblecloud, and you have shown yourself to be an outstanding hunter and honorable. You shall be the mentor of Wetpaw; and I expect you to pass on all of your knowledge to her."

Wetpaw was filled to the brim with excitement. She darted towards her new mentor, touching noses. Snakestrike exchanged proud gazes with the she-cat as the crowd started to break up. At the corner of her eye, Wetpaw spotted Snowpaw, Sagepaw, and Sharkpaw had all filed into a line and were bounding towards the apprentices' den.

"May I go pick my nest with Snowkit? Er, I mean, Snow*paw?*" Wetpaw asked her mentor, partly turning away as if her question had already been given an answer.

"Go ahead," Snakestrike chuckled, empathy slightly glistening in his optics. Wetpaw nodded curtly, pelting towards the other apprentices. She almost rammed into Snowpaw like the white apprentice had done to her, but skidded to a halt to deter that possibility.

Snowpaw slightly shuffled away in fear she would be impacted. "Come on!" Wetpaw hissed. "Let's go pick our nests!"

Snowpaw blinked, then smiled. "Okay, let's go!" she meowed excitedly. She and her sister darted towards the apprentices' den. They gaped at their sight.

It was a large structure of oak logs placed on a lush ground. Seaweed was curled around the stumps, occasionally flanked by hanging seashells dotted with beige and blossom, blue, light green, scarlet, and orange. The nests were consisted of moss, leaves, and feathers at the core, decorated with dandelions and tulips at the

edges.

Wetpaw's attention was reeled onto the most appealing nest of all. It was a nest almost completely made out of colorful starling feathers, the brink of the bedding brimmed with an array of flowers. Wetpaw could make out some: orchids, daisies, dandelions, tulips, and roses. The rest of the decoration were floral plants, but even with squinted eyes, the light grey apprentice couldn't identify what types they were.

A ginger forepaw was firmly placed on the bedding. "Paws off," Sagepaw growled, her voice half playful.

"Wow!" Snowpaw exclaimed. "You sure took time to make your bedding the most appealing."

"Not to brag," Sagepaw purred. "But not even the elders have a nest this nice. And they're always at camp!" Wetpaw narrowed her eyes. *I could probably make a nest just as nice if I had the time.*

"Can we hurry?" Wetpaw complained. "I want to get out to train today." Sagepaw's tail flicked.

"Er, okay," Sagepaw answered. She glanced around the den, pointing her tail to a spot near the entrance. "There's a spot right there."

Wetpaw padded over to inspect the spot. She cautiously sniffed around the location. She didn't quite like the spot was right next to the entrance. She didn't want to be woken up by some cat sliding through the barrier. As if reassuring her decision, the sun, out of nowhere, sharply shone in her eyes. She cocked her head out of the way. "Not that spot," Wetpaw muttered.

Sharkpaw was next to speak. "There's a spot next to me," she suggested, slightly nervous. *I want to be next to Snowpaw!*

Wetpaw turned her head to face Snowpaw. "Where are you going to settle?" she asked the white apprentice. Snowpaw had been investigating a spot towards the edge, partly startled at Wetpaw's question.

"Possibly over here," Snowpaw responded, scraping the soil to open up a larger spot. Wetpaw reluctantly scented around the area. It seemed pretty decent to the light grey she-cat. It was warm, sheltered by trees above that just about blocked the sun, and it wasn't too far from or close to the other apprentices.

"It seems pretty nice," Wetpaw commented, travelling over to a spot a whisker-length from Snowpaw. "I'll stay here." Snowpaw nodded in agreement. Wetpaw continued to speak after a few heartbeats. "Where's Weedpaw?" she asked her sister.

"I think he and Creekmist went out to train," Snowkit responded.

After nodding, Wetpaw ambled back towards the entrance to grab a few sheets of moss, before quickly arriving back and placing them onto her future nest. She prodded them flat, laying down to test the bedding.

She lifted her head. "Er, where did you two get the bird feathers?" she questioned Sagepaw and Sharkpaw.

"Spikepaw likes to collect them," Sagepaw replied.

"She should be back from training soon," Sharkpaw added to the ginger and black she-cat's statement. *Soon isn't good enough,* Wetpaw thought impatiently.

She raced out of the entrance to scope the ground for any flowers for decoration. She recognized only blades of grass for any decoration on the earthy ground. She glanced behind her shoulder, considering to ask the others for assistance. She decided against it. *I'm not dependent on them!*

She dashed around, looking towards every corner for any decoration. Frustration zapped through her. *Ugh!* She checked behind the warriors' den. The only other shrubbery varying from grass was the mossy vines that populated the stone. A faint sound of pawsteps came from behind.

"What are you doing here?" a voice scolded. It was the voice of Starlingflame. Wetpaw's neck fur bristled with irritation.

"It's none of your business," Wetpaw muttered.

"What's going on here?" another voice went. *Snakestrike.* "Wetpaw?"

Wetpaw grunted in response. "I was trying to find flowers to decorate my nest with," she informed, her tone revealing great annoyance. "There's none to be seen!"

Snakestrike's gaze softened. "Well," he started. "I can give you a tour of the territory. Maybe you can find some there."

"Can Snowpaw come too?" Wetpaw mewed hopefully.

"I think Thunderfoot already has other plans for her," Snakestrike sighed. "But next time, I promise."

"Fine," Wetpaw exhaled, disappointment flickering in her gaze. "But the other apprentices should know where I am. Starlingflame, could you tell them?"

Starlingflame grunted in response, turning away and trekking toward the apprentices' den. Wetpaw looked up excitedly at Snakestrike. *I'm finally going to see the territory!*

// Chapter Twenty Three

The light grey apprentice bounded ahead, her gaze shining with fascination. An array of colors flickered through her vision, emerging into a bright forest placed around. Her mentor's paws thundered behind, faltering to meet his apprentice's pace.

"Stop!" Snakestrike hissed. "Don't you want to slow down so you can see everything thoroughly?" His words convinced Wetpaw to skid to a halt. She observed the setting around her.

The oak trees had transformed to willow trees as the figures had trekked further. Undergrowth was blanketed over the ground, emitting droplets of water when trampled by paws. Wetpaw extended her pupils, trying to study all of the landscape. She was slightly disappointed that all she could see was undergrowth and trees, dotted with a few stones.

"Can you scent any prey?" Snakestrike panted. He fixed his gaze on Wetpaw.

Wetpaw slightly gaped her jaws to carefully scan the whole habitat for any prey. It was a slight struggle for her, because her nostrils seemed to be swarmed with the fragrance of water and lush undergrowth. Suddenly, a new alluring scent that emerged past all of the musty shrubbery caused her mouth to water. *Prey!*

"Over here!" Wetpaw squealed, pointing her tail to the right. She bolted towards a willow, where a water vole gently scraped the bottom to construct a den, dipping its head to slightly nibble a root. As Wetpaw burst from the shrubbery, it winced in shock and started to scramble away.

Wetpaw swiped her claws toward the water vole. It sprinted away with an alarmed squeak, ducking past stray branches. *You're not getting away that easily!* Wetpaw lunged forward, claws outstretched. She contorted her head in each direction the water vole zigzagged, shooting her claws toward it once more.

She missed by a claw-length, hissing with irritation. She no longer kept track of where she placed her paws, only where her target was scurrying towards.

"Come back!" Snakestrike's call rang in Wetpaw's ears. "You won't be able to catch it!"

Weariness started kicking in for the light grey apprentice. Her speed decreased, her breathing growing shallow. The water vole was no longer able to be seen, sheltered protectively by the undergrowth.

"Mouse dung!" Wetpaw breathed, frustration threaded in her tone.

"I'll teach you a few hunting techniques after you get more familiar with the territories," Snakestrike mewed. Embarrassment struck Wetpaw. *I couldn't catch it! Snakestrike probably thinks I'm a terrible hunter.* Determination followed her feelings. *I'll prove him wrong!*

Something interrupted Wetpaw's thoughts: the sound of other paws. Her ears lifted. A pale grey tom was visible through the undergrowth. *Weedpaw?*

"Weedpaw?" Wetpaw questioned. The apprentice's green eyes glanced back at her. He snorted in response and scornfully whisked away and followed his mentor. Wetpaw's ears indignantly pinned to the back of her head. *Tick-pelt!* Slight sorrow drifted through her.

"Maybe he's just busy," Snakestrike mewed. Wetpaw knew that wasn't true. Her mentor seemed to slightly agree, too.

"No," Wetpaw sighed. She flicked around, observing the land around her. She did realize it was quite elegant. The forest was gleaming with lush green, leaves swishing in the breeze. The trees sheltered the two figures from the wind, acting as a shield.

Scents flowed into her nostrils in the crisp breeze. Leaf-fall had been rumored to have landed a bit harshly in the other Clans, but the chilling season barely laid a claw on RiverClan. Prey still seemed to be abundant, sustaining full RiverClan bellies.

"This way," Snakestrike directed, pointing his tail to a small clearing that was visible in the distance. Wetpaw followed the tabby,

creating an image in her head of the territory around. Prey scents still made her mouth water, but she tried to resist the temptation. *It seems Snakestrike is already annoyed enough with me.*

After what felt like moons, the two figures had trekked along the forest floor and were only a few fox-lengths away from the dell. A stone hollow was cratered into the ground, circled by willows at its edges. Wetpaw padded towards the edge, peeking inside.

Cautiously, she crept inside, placing her paws onto cold stone, whiskers twitching as many scents clung to them. Snakestrike followed, precisely landing inside of the dip. Wetpaw scavenged around, sniffing around to detect any aroma of prey.

She peeked inside of small gaps drilled in the cavern, searching for any trace of mice. *I can't not bring back prey from my first trip out of camp, right?*

"This is the Vigil Hollow," Snakestrike instructed. The name appeared familiar to Wetpaw; she had heard many discuss it. "When the deputy receives its new position, it will sit vigil here with the supervision of its ancestors," her mentor explained. "It's unique to RiverClan's traditions."

"Is there any prey around here?" Wetpaw asked, hunger and determination gnawing at her stomach.

"Sometimes," Snakestrike answered, quickly licking some stray fur on his flank and peering into a gap. "Usually only mice, though." Wetpaw felt cold with disappointment. She took a look at another cleft, extending her pupils for better vision in the dark that seized the corner.

She could only spot the thread of cobwebs that hung on the ceiling of the crack. Slight frustration swept through her. The day seemed to be getting later, and Wetpaw's hopes were sinking. She unsheathed her claws into the stone. She wanted to hunt with her siblings, serving RiverClan to her best ability.

"Can you teach me some hunting moves?" Wetpaw asked her mentor.

"I think you should get a better view of the territory first," Snakestrike answered. "Don't feel bad you didn't catch the water vole. You didn't know how."

Wetpaw didn't answer. Snakestrike bounded towards the exit, Wetpaw behind him. They crawled out of the hollow, their paws meeting blades of grass once again.

"Are you ready to see the river?" Snakestrike prompted. Wetpaw suddenly felt a burst of excitement. Her weary paws grew strength again, and she was ready to pelt off.

She squealed an elated "YES!" and hurled herself towards the direction her mentor was facing. The wind buffeted her fur as her speed grew, chilling her body. But she barely payed a tooth-length of attention to the harsh breezes.

A faint call came from behind her as she kept on. She defeated the temptation of turning back, decidedly ignoring her mentor's calls. The branches she dipped under and trees she veered past seemed like obstacles easy as kicking away a pebble. She didn't care her breathing grew slightly restless. She didn't care her lungs demanded for her to come to a halt.

She didn't mind the alarmed voice sounding from behind her. It was as if the pain soon gave up on afflicting her. The flowing of the river started to ring in her ears, blocking out all of the other sounds. Excitement invaded Wetpaw's mind. *I'll get to see the river!*

She skirted past a few more trees, before the river grew into sight. It was bigger than she imagined. Its waves rapidly lapped against the edges, occasionally dragging portions of mud into the water. Wetpaw still bounded towards it, fascination in her gaze.

Suddenly, her mind screeched for her to come to a halt. She was only paw-lengths away from the stream. She unsheathed her claws, trying to dig them into the ground. But it seemed too late. Panic jolted through her as her paws violently slipped on the dampened mud. She yowled out with fear, her heart lurching as she was hurled towards the torrent.

Water enveloped the light grey she-cat. The currents heaved her in dozens of directions, once slamming her onto the edge of the waterway and throwing her into a slight daze. As she tried to cry out, it only came out as a choking gurgle. The liquid clogged her windpipe and nostrils. Her lungs screeched with a requirement of air.

STARCLAN, HELP ME! PLEASE! She was encased by fear and terror. Water viciously stung her eyes and throat, the currents jerking her around like crow-food. She vainly threw her paws towards the surface, trying to pull herself out of the brutal tides. Her feeble efforts were short-lived as her strength was suddenly swept away like the current.

She navigated herself around, trying to grasp a stone that clung firmly onto the wall of the river. She tried to get a hold on it, before being flung the opposite way. Every bit of determination sunk to hopelessness. She took a moment to try to regain her strength. But time was of the essence. Her need for a breath grew urgent. She wanted to gape her jaws and feel air expand her lungs.

Her limbs felt weird. Her blood was losing air. She was losing any spark of strength.

"Lift your head!" Snakestrike shouted crucially. "Let the currents carry you to the surface!"

Wetpaw desperately lifted her head, going limp for a heartbeat. But she felt unbalanced. She could detect the waves cruelly pushing her onto her side, about to be taken away eternally. She started helplessly flailing around in the savage waters, twisting around towards the edge of the brook. She was being pulled the other direction, away from her mentor, away from everyone... forever lost in the freezing waters.

Her body was hollering with pain, cold nipping at the tips of her pelt. She stifled another choked shriek; but nothing but a small gurgle could be heard. She could already see StarClan's grounds in her mind. *I hope Snowpaw and Smallpelt remember me... and Lightstar..* her eyelids delicately shut, her body going limp.

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She woke up in a pattern of violent coughs, water spurting from her jaws. She gasped for air, relief cloaking over her previous emotions. She gulped and glanced at her mentor, who gazed at her with great concern.

"Are you okay?" Snakestrike breathed.

After another bout of coughs, Wetpaw briefly nodded. She lay in the bed of grass, trying to become aware of what was occuring. "I..." she wheezed hoarsely.

"I'll take you to Minnowpool's den," Snakestrike mewed, setting his tail on Wetpaw's shoulder. His tone then grew stern. "But don't go ahead of me like that again."

Wetpaw gave a slight nod. She *never* wanted to do that again. Even one glance at the brook sent a shiver up her spine. She shook out her pelt of water droplets; but it was almost useless. Her coat was absolutely drenched, every fur-tip soaked to the core. As she was still staggering back onto her paws, a new, harsh scent stung her senses.

Four brawny figures stood across the brook. There was a large, muscular brown and black dappled tom with two different tinted eyes. A younger red-brown tom flanked him, a scarred grey she-cat and a blue-grey apprentice at her paws standing firmly next to him. *ShadowClan!* Wetpaw hissed, almost gagging at their repulsive stench.

The broadest tom took a step forward. "Why are you trespassing on ShadowClan territory?" he inquired, his tail twitching aggravatedly.

"We never set a single paw on your territory," Snakestrike stated firmly.

"The river belongs to us!" Wetpaw snapped. "It's why we're called *River*Clan!" Snakestrike shot her a warning glance. *I'm trying to help!*

The patrol seemed to notice the apprentices' drenched form. "And you call yourself good swimmers," the red-brown tom snickered.

"RiverClan can't even keep their apprentices from half-drowning," the grey she-cat added in a snort. Wetpaw's ears angrily pinned flat onto her head. She puffed out her chest defensively.

"You don't even know how to swim!" Wetpaw squealed. Snakestrike pushed her aside, squinting his eyes with anger.

"You're just trying to provoke us," Snakestrike meowed. "There's nothing to quarrel over. We have not strayed into your territory. All your doing is building up unnecessary tension." Wetpaw suddenly noticed the muscular tom was cast a weirdly suspicious glance to her. Wetpaw blinked with confusion.

"There's very well something to quarrel over," the grey she-cat hissed. "You're stealing from us!" *Why would we need to steal from you, fish-brain?* Wetpaw's tail lashed indignantly.

"We have no need to steal your prey," Snakestrike protested. "We have plenty ourselves." The grey she-cat narrowed her eyes, growling provokingly.

The blue-grey apprentice's pelt bristled out as she crept closer to the bank. "Step back!" the big red tom ordered.

"Us?" Wetpaw challenged. "You step back!"

"Come on," the muscular tom rasped. "Let's head back to camp. We can settle this later." The blue-grey apprentice dipped low into an aggressive crouch, unsheathing her claws into the ground.

The red tom reluctantly padded beside the muscular tom. He called, "Greywing, Rainpaw, come on." Greywing grunted as she gave up the quarrel, a disgruntled Rainpaw following behind her. A wave of relief crashed over Wetpaw.

Snakestrike directed his apprentice the other direction. As they trekked further, he quickly checked behind them. "Don't do that again," he chided in a low growl to Wetpaw. Wetpaw felt slightly ashamed, but she tried to convince herself she did the right thing. Her shoulder ached from where she was slammed against the stone, so she leaned onto Snakestrike.

"Okay?" Snakestrike reaffirmed, his voice sterner. Wetpaw grunted in response. It didn't seem to fully convince her mentor, as his suspicious gaze was still fixed on her.

What did I do wrong? Water from her dampened coat dribbled onto the ground, creating a drenched trail along the already lush undergrowth. After a long, tiring journey of strenuous plodding, they finally arrived to camp.

RiverClan warriors casted them shocked glances, Snowpaw darting towards them. "What happened?" the white she-cat gasped.

"She fell in the river," Snakestrike answered quickly, urging Wetpaw to the medicine den. They dashed across camp, dipping under the den's overhang. Wetpaw's nostrils immediately flared at the many bitter scents that stung them.

Minnowpool whisked around, shock slightly igniting in his eyes. He padded over, sniffing Wetpaw. "Did she fall in the river?" he questioned.

Snakestrike nodded in response.

"Take a deep breath," Minnowpool directed. Wetpaw obeyed, sucking in a large breath. It sent relief through her that air was abundant. She could still recall the memory of being engulfed by the water, her lungs blazing like fire was scorching inside of them.

Snakestrike anxiously shuffled his paws at the entrance. What would the Clan think if Wetpaw caught greencough, or was severely injured, in her first day of training? It wasn't all about his dignity, though. His amber gaze held honest concern for his apprentice.

"Your lungs sound okay," Minnowpool commented, giving Snakestrike and Wetpaw a puff of relief. He shifted over to examine Wetpaw's shoulder, slightly tensing up. "She's probably going to need to rest her shoulder for a few days. It's starting to swell." Wetpaw's neck fur rose. She didn't want to be secluded to camp again.

Snakestrike dealt Wetpaw a concerned glance. "Can I still sleep in

the apprentices' den?" Wetpaw asked.

"Yes," Minnowpool meowed. "But try and keep off your paws for a few days." Disappointment still clouded Wetpaw's expression. *But I want to train like the others!*

"Thank you," mewed Snakestrike, dipping his head graciously. He rested his tail on Wetpaw's back, flicking his ear towards the apprentices' den. "You should go rest," he ordered.

Wetpaw resentfully started padding towards the den. She then gritted her teeth as pain wrenched her shoulder. *Maybe it's a good thing I'll rest.*

She shuffled inside of the den. She glanced around, surprised to detect another RiverClan scent. She glanced around, her muzzle wrinkling up with anger as she noticed Weedpaw, laying in a nest in the furthest place possible. A bitter taste formed on Wetpaw's tongue. Weedpaw had avoided her, not even trying to hide it.

Wetpaw collapsed in her nest, huffing an infuriated breath from her nostrils. She glimpsed over her shoulder, where Weedpaw, clearly awake, sat. He said nothing. Wetpaw stifled a low growl, going limp in her nest, ready for sleep to take her over.

// Chapter Twenty Four

Spottedpelt had awoken, aimlessly padding around camp and waiting for others to shuffle out of their dens to bring on patrol. It felt weird setting the patrols while being escorted on them. The spotted she-cat sometimes would feel anger over Vinestar's treatment, but tried to remind herself how lucky she was. She was appointed the *deputy. The future leader!* It was still hard to comprehend.

But she tried not to get ahead of herself. *Can a deputy even be honored if they're so excited to be leader that they forget about the needs of their leader?* Spottedpelt's coat shivered at the thought. Could she be a good leader? Was it her fault Vinestar was attacked by dogs?

Her ear twitched as she heard pawsteps scuff against the sand, approaching her. She blinked as she recognized Cinnamontail, who had recently been given his warrior name along with Molefang and Tallear. Buzzardsong, Embergaze, and Gingerpelt had been given their names about a quarter moon earlier.

"Will you and Tansybranch join me for a hunting patrol?" Spottedpelt asked.

"Actually," Cinnamontail answered. "Word has said Frostkit, Grasskit, and Rockkit's apprentice ceremonies are occuring today. I think we should stay for that."

Spottedpelt gave the ginger-brown tom a slight nod, treading towards the clearing. The sun had just about started to peek over the horizon, pouring amber rays of sunlight into the clearing and reflecting over the stones. It turned Spottedpelt's black spots a shade of dark golden, making the air warmer. Spottedpelt soaked in the unusual heat, her neck fur flattening as she started to slightly relax.

More shapes started emerging from the dens, stretching in the light. Webshine trekked to the fresh-kill pile, scooping out a large rabbit and directing her tail towards Lionrage, directing him to share it with her.

Willowheart and her apprentice, Brokenpaw, crawled into the clearing, Brokenpaw with a limp. Vinestar seemed to be affected by the bustle, appearing out of his den and quickly licking one of his broad shoulders. He seemed to have gotten frailer over leaf-fall, sending a burst of nervousness through Spottedpelt as she thought about becoming leader.

She fixed her gaze on Vinestar. Was he angry Spottedpelt would probably be leader? He fixed a quick glance on Spottedpelt. He looked another way so swiftly that Spottedpelt couldn't detect his expression. *Stop worrying so much about the future! You're not necessarily going to be leader.* The mottled she-cat shook her head, emptying her mind of thoughts.

Darkpool emerged from the WindClan nursery, her three elated kits bouncing at her paws. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here under the Wind Stone," Vinestar puffed. He started to climb the stone, his muscles bunching up as he used all of his strength. He struggled up, huffing a breath as he finally arrived at the top. His age really started to show.

Frostkit, Grasskit, and Rockkit bounded to the foot of the Wind Stone, followed by their mother. Spottedpelt trudged toward the boulder, climbing onto one of the lower ledges. She scoped the clearing for Sorrelpath. The tortoiseshell she-cat wasn't anywhere to be seen. She was still devastated over Eaglekit going missing and her other two kits' deaths. Spottedpelt couldn't blame her.

The WindClan deputy always prayed that Eaglekit would come back. But as moons started to pass, so did hope. Twoclaw and Beavertail arrived in the clearing, followed by Copperfrost and Fiercetalon. A weary Sorrelpath finally emerged, blankly sitting down in the crowd.

Spottedpelt tried to get her sister's attention, but Sorrelpath didn't seem to notice. Disappointment clouded her expression. She gazed up at Vinestar, who seemed to be looking a bit impatient. The grey tabby didn't meet the she-cat's look, only watching intently as an audience gathered below him.

Littlefoot joined the bevy of warriors. Tigertail sat at the very rear

of the crowd, not with anyone. He didn't even glance at Sorrelpath. But he didn't look indignant; he appeared guilty, as if he didn't know how to approach his mate anymore. Spottedpelt felt a pang of sympathy for the tabby tom.

"The time has come for Frostkit, Grasskit, and Rockkit to be apprenticed," Vinestar announced. "From this day forward, until they receive their warrior names, they shall be known as Frostpaw, Grasspaw, and Rockpaw. Rockpaw, your mentor will be Amberstripe. Grasspaw, your mentor will be Cloverpatch. And Frostpaw, your mentor will be Spottedpelt." *I'm her mentor?*

Spottedpelt quivered with excitement. Why would Vinestar of assigned an apprentice to her? Hadn't he still had a grudge against her? She saw Frostpaw look up at her with a large smile. "Amberstripe, Cloverpatch, and Spottedpelt, I expect you to pass on all of your knowledge to your apprentices."

Spottedpelt lunged off of the stone's ledge, immediately greeted by Frostpaw who touched noses with her. "Hi!" she meowed ecstatically.

Before Vinestar leaped down from the Wind Stone, Lionrage stepped in front of it. "I have an announcement," he broadcasted. "Webshine is expecting my kits."

Congratulations zigzagged through the audience. Lionrage bowed his head, dashing towards his mate. Spottedpelt was always thankful to have more kits born into the Clan. But she never seemed to ever find a mate, nor did she really desire one.

Frostpaw's siblings signaled her towards the apprentices' den. "Er, I guess they want to go over to explore the apprentices' den," Frostpaw observed. She glanced up at her mentor. "May I join them?" she asked.

Spottedpelt still was in shock that she was assigned an apprentice. Frostpaw's message threw her out of a daze, and she quickly mewed, "Sure."

Frostpaw gave the spotted she-cat a thankful nod, bounding off to

follow her siblings into the stone arrangement of the apprentices' den. Spottedpelt sighed. *Would a warrior have to escort me when I train Frostpaw?* She searched the clearing for a smug-looking Willowheart, but the silver tabby she-cat was nowhere to be seen. She probably went back to the medicine den.

Spottedpelt glimpsed back at Vinestar as the crowd started to break up, who slowly climbed down the Wind Stone. She squinted her eyes, trying to detect any regret in Vinestar's eyes. If there was any, the broad-shouldered tom did a good job hiding it.

Spottedpelt craned her head around, where she discovered Sorrelpath starting to pad back to the warriors den. She bolted towards her, skidding to a halt. "Sorrelpath!" she gasped.

Sorrelpath met her with a blank expression. "H-how are you?" Spottedpelt stammered.

Sorrelpath fixed her gaze on the ground. "I don't know," she squeaked. Spottedpelt set her tail on the tortoiseshell's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Spottedpelt mewed, fixing a guilty look on her sister. "D-do you want to go hunting to possibly cheer you up?"

"Could you send out another searching party for Eaglekit?" Sorrelpath asked, forcing the words out of her jaws as if she was trying to swallow bitter herbs.

"We've looked everywhere," Spottedpelt croaked. Sorrelpath gave her a faint nod, acting like all of the colors were drained from her tortoiseshell coat. Sympathy and sorrow struck Spottedpelt like a vicious talon.

"I think I'm just going to rest," Sorrelpath sighed, wordlessly strolling over to the warriors' den. Spottedpelt prayed there was some way to cheer her up; some way to find Eaglekit.

// Chapter Twenty Five

Thistlethorn padded along the pine straw ground, flanked by Shimmerpaw. She had taken her apprentice out to hunt. It seemed Shimmerpaw had grown more familiar with the pine forest and grown calmer. Her pace was the same as Thistlethorn's, her ear carefully twitching at the sound of any rustles. Thistlethorn felt proud. After about a quarter moon of training, Shimmerpaw was already acting like a warrior.

But that didn't mean her skills were built up. She knew little to no battle moves, and had not yet even close to mastered the hunting crouch. But Thistlethorn knew the black-spotted apprentice was getting along well. Shimmerpaw sure knew not to act out while she was around her mentor if she wanted to keep her pelt on.

They ventured farther from camp, emerging into a thick canopy of pines. The trees' bodies and limbs cast a web-like shadow along the pine-straw littered ground. The sight was quite interesting, quite often catching the eye. The woodland seemed to block many of the chilling leaf-fall breezes; making it a decent place for prey to shelter.

Shimmerpaw stopped abruptly. "Crow!" she whispered, lowering into a hunting crouch. Thistlethorn took in a large breath, the scent wafting into her nose. *She's right.*

Shimmerpaw stealthily prowled along the ground, her ears swiveling around to build up her surroundings. Thistlethorn quietly crept behind her. A crow pecked at the ground, trying to pluck a worm out from the ground. Shimmerpaw's legs trembled with excitement. She had never caught prey without Thistlethorn's assistance.

Thistlethorn went completely still and silent. She wouldn't want to ruin Shimmerpaw's catch. Shimmerpaw's tail slightly twitched in the air as she dipped lower. She suddenly propelled in the air, her hind legs noisily scraping the pine straw and alerting the crow. The

crow frantically fluttered its wings, barely escaping as Shimmerpaw gaped her jaws and aimed her claws towards it.

Shimmerpaw crashed into the ground, quickly stammering onto her paws. Her ears lowered with disappointment, her muzzle wrinkling up with frustration as she glanced up at the escaping crow. "Fox dung!" she breathed.

"Watch your language!" Thistlethorn gasped. Shimmerpaw put on an indignant expression, stalking away, twitching her tail for her mentor to follow.

"Next time still your tail more," Thistlethorn directed. "And try not to make so much noise." Shimmerpaw grunted in response. Her whiskers quivered as she crept along, trying to detect prey. Thistlethorn felt a pang of sympathy for the apprentice. She didn't want to leave until her apprentice made a catch.

"How about we try closer to RiverClan territory?" Shimmerpaw suggested, breaking the silence that previously lingered in the crisp air.

Thistlethorn blinked. "Well," she sighed. "Recently a ShadowClan patrol got in a quarrel with them. Some mouse-brained apprentice fell in the river and had to be saved by her mentor. The patrol arrived soon after and interrogated them. I don't know if Whitestar would want to start more drama with them."

"Oh come on!" Shimmerpaw squealed. "It's *our* territory!" Thistlethorn couldn't help but agree with the apprentice's reason. She didn't mind an encounter with the fish-breathed RiverClan cats, but she also didn't want to get into any more trouble with Whitestar.

"Maybe if we can hide ourselves enough," Thistlethorn presumed, quickly licking her paw. "But that's on the other side of the territory. We might as well hunt here, it'll be more efficient than travelling all the way over there."

"Yeah, I guess.." Shimmerpaw breathed. She gaped her jaws slightly, scanning around the clearing.

Thistlethorn lifted her muzzle, joining her apprentice in the search. A trace of squirrel caught the black and brown warrior's attention, and something also seemed to attract Shimmerpaw. Shimmerpaw went stiff, holding her tail still in the air and crouching closer onto the forest floor.

Her mentor detected it too: a mouse. Thistlethorn couldn't see it being diagonal from her apprentice in the grove, but she figured the spotted apprentice had it targeted.

Thistlethorn carefully craned her head, squinting her eyes and trying to peek where Shimmerpaw's gaze was fixed. She suddenly heard the click of small claws a few tail-lengths away from her. It came from behind. She cocked her head around, spotting the squirrel she had scented. It had an acorn in its large cheeks, searching around for more.

Thistlethorn dipped low on the ground, planning out her moves. She almost completely silenced her breathing, her tail going still. She readied her hind legs for the pounce. She suddenly lunged for the squirrel, her claws outstretched and teeth bared.

The squirrel's ears twitched, scrambling itself together to bolt off. But it was too late. Thistlethorn quickly fastened her jaws around its neck, lifting its limp body from the ground. She scanned around for Shimmerpaw.

Shimmerpaw was still stalking the mouse on the other side of the canopy, determination glittering in her eyes. Shimmerpaw leaped, hardly making a sound. The mouse couldn't scurry away fast enough as it was pinned down by the young apprentice, Shimmerpaw latching her jaws around its neck.

"I caught it!" she shrieked with excitement. "I caught it! I caught it!"

"Nice job," Thistlethorn purred. She grasped the squirrel in her jaws, padding over towards her apprentice.

Shimmerpaw looked up at the brown and black she-cat, blinking. "You can eat it," Thistlethorn mewed, dipping her head. Shimmerpaw's proud expression changed, her fur bristling.

"Have you forgotten? The kits and elders need to eat first; the warrior code says so!" Shimmerpaw questioned. She glanced down at her catch.

"But it's your first catch," Thistlethorn argued.

"This is a test, isn't it?" Shimmerpaw responded, slightly annoyed.

Thistlethorn shook her head. "I'm serious," she meowed to Shimmerpaw. "It's your first catch. I think you have the right to eat it for your achievement."

"But what would the others think?" Shimmerpaw protested.

Thistlethorn paused for a moment. What would the others think? She rolled her eyes. Who cares? "No one will know," she promised. "You should enjoy it warm. *You* caught it."

"But what about the elders and kits?" Shimmerpaw added anxiously.

"There's still a good amount of food in the pine forest," Thistlethorn informed the spotted apprentice. "And yes, I know the kits have great potential. But the elders? They just sit and do nothing all day. Who does the hunting? Us. Who does all the fighting? Us. If Whitestar finds out about this and has a problem, I'll speak to him myself."

That seemed to convince Shimmerpaw. "Alright," she sighed, warily lowering her head and taking a bite from the mouse. Her proud expression seemed to grow back. Soon, the mouse was finished. Thistlethorn had buried the evidence and caught a frog to make up for it.

The two she-cats were making their ways back to camp. Shimmerpaw had seemed to forget her and her mentor's argument, as there was a big, proud smile chiseled on her face. Thistlethorn could see the apprentice's great excitement.

"I'm going to be a great hunter!" Shimmerpaw squealed. She caught her mentor's gaze, smiling somewhat awkwardly. "And a fighter, too!" she added, hoping to please Thistlethorn.

' Thistlethorn nodded approvingly. Shimmerpaw was getting along very well. Thistlethorn had doubted her at first, but now, the dubious feelings had lessened. The familiar scent of ShadowClan grew stronger to the two figures as they closed in closer to the camp.

Shimmerpaw bounded ahead, almost tripping over a root. She quickly sprung over it, followed by her mentor. Her tail frizzled out excitedly. "Let's race!" she squealed.

Thistlethorn seemed to partly enjoy the lively spotted she-cat's energy. "We need to bring the prey back to camp first," she meowed through a mouthful of fur as the frog and squirrel she caught dangled from her jaws.

"Alright," Shimmerpaw sighed, slightly resentful. Before they knew it, the sun was starting to set, and as they set the prey they caught onto the fresh-kill pile, Shimmerpaw was exhausted.

"Congratulations to your apprentice," Pinewhisker murmured respectfully to Thistlethorn, dipping his head. "I still remember my first catch. It was a frog. Ha, I leaped into the pond at the marshes to get it! My pelt was soaked! But, that pond is almost completely dried out now.. well, help yourself to the pile. The elders and kits have already eaten."

Thistlethorn didn't feel that hungry. Her ambition felt stronger. It seemed she had barely gotten anywhere she wanted with her apprentice. It felt like she swallowed a stone that sat in her stomach as determination clawed at her mind. She sensed a tension to her in her Clan, like false promises. Was it because of her origins? She figured so. "I'm not very hungry," she meowed quickly to Pinewhisker, whisking away to amplify her thoughts herself. *This is far from over. Shimmerpaw will learn the truth, and soon the truth will find its way to all, where it will wrap like a thread around their paws and trap them in the legacy of their world, leading my bloodline to rule this unruly forest and allow my ancestors to rise from confinement.*

// Chapter Twenty Six

Frostpaw was bowled over by Spottedpelt in the Training Dune, swiping her paws feebly back at her mentor. Spottedpelt circled her, waiting to deflect her next move. Frostpaw squinted her eyes, contemplating thoroughly on how to distract the spotted she-cat.

The snowy apprentice quickly rolled onto her paws, hissing as she made a lunge for her mentor. Spottedpelt's paw batted her ear, knocking her over into the sand. Frostpaw immediately got back onto four legs, dipping under Spottedpelt's belly and sweeping lithe she-cat's legs from under her.

Frostpaw skidded to a halt, glancing back at the she-cat who collapsed into the dune in an awkward position. "You are very resilient in battle," Spottedpelt praised. "You always get back onto your paws without giving up. I'm proud of you."

Frostpaw smiled at the complement. She playfully brushed sand towards her mentor, chuckling. Spottedpelt rolled her eyes jokingly, shaking off her sandy pelt. "It's time we go back to camp," she directed to her apprentice, pointing her tail the direction of the destination.

Through the problems and bustle of the Clan, Frostpaw felt glee. Her mentor was almost as fun as her littermates. The two she-cats scrambled through the beige powder, Frostpaw like an unusual cluster of snow in the sandy landscape. Frostpaw felt surges of memories from training zap through her mind, her smile growing larger on her muzzle as she recalled every heartbeat.

Spottedpelt almost seemed to be distracted from their chaotic life as well, but as they trekked forward, she seemed to be astray from the glad memories, her shoulders slumping and her eyes widening. *What is she thinking about? Should I be worried too?*

As Frostpaw kept on, she suddenly noticed she was ahead of her mentor. She glimpsed back, where she saw Spottedpelt going in a

slow pace. "Come on!" Frostpaw urged the she-cat. "What's the hold up?"

"Nothing," Spottedpelt responded quickly. "Let's go." She leaped out of her thoughts, bounding towards the snowlike apprentice. Frostpaw thought she was acting quite peculiar. What was she hiding?

"There you are!" Littlefoot growled. "Don't you remember you have to be guided by a warrior?"

"That's been for moons," Spottedpelt protested. "I haven't done anything. I've gone out of camp before, and no cat said anything."

"You admitted it!" Littlefoot gasped. "Just wait until Vinestar finds out!"

"He already knows," Spottedpelt mewed slyly. "Tigertail's reported me many, many times." Frostpaw wouldn't put it past Tigertail. Every time she saw him, she couldn't detect what exact emotion he had. It seemed like a mix. It seemed to be great anger, sadness, and even a trace of fear.

Littlefoot narrowed his eyes. "Fine," he huffed. "Go on."

Spottedpelt and Frostpaw reluctantly obeyed, Littlefoot being left behind. As they ventured further, Frostpaw glanced back, where she discovered the grey tom had vanished. She scoped around her. There was still no sign of the WindClan warrior. She figured he had gone to hunt or patrol, or maybe took a different way to camp.

This time Spottedpelt was the one urging Frostpaw on. She seemed to be in a hurry. As she called out to her apprentice, Frostpaw finally decided to follow. They padded across slight patches of moor, each step more tiring than the last. They skirted past rocks and dips in the ground that might block their way, weak gusts of wind barely ruffling their pelts.

Soon they gained some energy back, sprinting through sandy plains. Spottedpelt, of course, was almost a dozen fox-lengths in front of Frostpaw, as she was one of the fastest runners in the Clan.

Frostpaw could barely keep up. But many times, Spottedpelt glanced back, making sure the snowy she-cat was still following.

Frostpaw could feel that they were close, but her paws were aching. She stopped and panted. Her tongue felt as dry as the sand. "Can w-we take a break and find some water?" she breathed.

Spottedpelt paused. "I don't know if there's any puddles near here," she sighed, looking almost as exhausted as Frostpaw. "We're almost to camp."

Frostpaw groaned, giving her a slight nod and trying to gulp air. She continued on the challenging journey. It seemed like an unusually warm leaf-fall day, especially to those of WindClan that have no trees to shelter them. And there was barely any wind that day, either.

After long moments of toiling along the landscape, Frostpaw and Spottedpelt finally saw camp. They bounded along the final stretches of sand, finally padding between the two stones that symboled the entrance.

"We made it," Frostpaw puffed, padding over to a drinking puddle. She gulped quickly, relief washing over her. Suddenly, she heard a meeting call from Vinestar. Licking her lips, she turned over and gazed at the Wind Stone, where a frail looking Vinestar stood.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here under the Wind Stone," he meowed in a slightly wheezing voice. Cats twitched their ears as they heard his announcement, padding towards the center of the clearing and gathering at the foot of the stone.

Expressions of concern were plastered on many cats' faces. Frostpaw followed, the feeling enveloping her like she had swallowed a stone; an emotion of worry. Had Littlefoot told on them? She detected Tigertail dashing over in an urgent an angry pace, Littlefoot watching him with an unreadable expression.

Twoclaw was the final cat to arrive as Tigertail barged past him, almost shoving the old tom into the soil. Beavertail and Twoclaw's

son, Fiercetalon, hissed at the brown tabby tom. Tigertail skidded to an abrupt halt, gasping in a slight need for breath and lifting his gaze to Vinestar.

As Vinestar was starting to gape his jaws to announce, Tigertail interrupted him urgently. His voice was firm as he declared, "Spottedpelt has broken the deal!"

Fiercetalon, Tansybranch, Frostpaw, Spottedpelt, Darkpool, Cloverpatch, Copperfrost, the apprentices, and the elders stayed behind as many enraged and intrigued cats erupted from the crowd. Sorrelpath sat by herself, away from it all. "I'm not surprised!" Gingerpaw jeered. Many cats seemed to have adapted to the crowd, exchanging confused glances. Many had seemed tired of all the Spottedpelt hullabaloo.

Vinestar raised a suspicious eyebrow to Spottedpelt, causing Frostpaw's fur to bristle. *Can't this all be over?*

"Go on," Vinestar directed to Tigertail, his tone serious.

"This is ridiculous," Frostpaw heard Tansybranch whisper into Spottedpelt's ear. "I will always be on your side in this, Spottedpelt."

Spottedpelt dipped her head thankfully to her former apprentice. Frostpaw glanced back towards the clearing, an anxious feeling sunken into her stomach. She spotted an angry Willowheart who stood with narrowed eyes toward the situation. But the medicine cat spoke any word or took any action. Was she afraid too? She normally stood up for Spottedpelt, but this time she seemed to only be watching with indignation burning in her optics.

"She went out by herself and Frostpaw, and *not* with a warrior," Tigertail growled, sending an outraged look to Spottedpelt, who's fur along her spine started to stand up straight.

Vinestar craned his head and gazed at Spottedpelt. "And do I really need to ask if this is true?" he ridiculed. "I already know who to trust," he rasped, facing Tigertail and many other warriors with a trusting look.

"Excuse me?" Copperfrost's voice arose from the crowd, her shoulder muscles bunching up. "Spottedpelt is an honorable deputy. She should be treated as such."

"Honorable?" Vinestar snarled, smiling coldly. "I'm a mouse if that's in any way true."

After that, the cats supporting Spottedpelt wrinkled their muzzles, looking offended. Spottedpelt seemed to slightly lower her focus to the ground and faintly nodded, as if partially agreeing with Vinestar. Frostpaw glimpsed concerningly at the she-cat. *That's not true! Spottedpelt, you're the most honorable cat I know!* The frost-white apprentice wished she could screech it out loud towards the whole cluster.

"What shall be her punishment, Vinestar?" Tigertail sneered, satisfaction growing on his face. He glanced vengefully towards Spottedpelt.

"Wait!" Tansybranch intervened, lifting her muzzle and stepping in front of the line of warriors from the back. "Spottedpelt didn't do anything wrong. And if she did, wouldn't we tell you?"

"She's getting worse by every heartbeat! Can't you see it?" Tigertail yowled. "She is the reason Sorrelpath's kits died!"

At the mention of her fallen kits, Sorrelpath darted off, vanishing under the mouth of the warriors' den. Frostpaw felt a pang of sympathy jolt through her for the she-cat. How could the topic of her kits be thrown around like it was throughout the Clan? Couldn't they tell it hurt Sorrelpath?

"She never destroyed the catmint in the first place!" Cloverpatch shouted.

"Fox-heart!" Tigertail screeched to Spottedpelt. Darkpool bared her teeth, stepping defensively in front of the dappled she-cat. Frostpaw felt a voice tickle her ear.

"Can we go back to the apprentices' den?" the voice asked. It was Grasspaw. "I'm tired of all this arguing."

Frostpaw quickly shook her head. "No!" she mewed sharply. "We need to defend Spottedpelt. We can't just leave her here to face Vinestar's wrath!"

"I'm sure Vinestar'll make a reasonable decision," Grasspaw argued.

"I-I don't know.." Frostpaw squeaked. The crowd was still intensifying with anger around her, spitting defiant insults towards each other. Her neck fur bristled with fear. She saw threatening gazes fixed sternly onto her followed by furious growls.

"Quiet!" Vinestar spat. He signaled his tail towards Spottedpelt, who reluctantly stepped in front of her allies.

"Vinestar," Tansybranch interrupted as Vinestar opened his jaws. "You gave Spottedpelt an apprentice. You must be warming up to her for being generous, right?"

"Another regret," Vinestar muttered. He contorted his head towards Spottedpelt. "Maybe I should just give Frostpaw another mentor, eh?" Frostpaw was blasted with horror.

"No!" she shrieked, padding over to Spottedpelt.

"I thought so," Vinestar puffed. "I'm getting too old for all of this. All I shall demand," he meowed, his gaze directed towards Frostpaw. "If your mentor does anything peculiar, report her immediately."

"My mentor did nothing wrong!" Frostpaw snapped.

Vinestar grunted in response. Tigertail's ears lowered, showing a disgruntled emotion, and the outraged rally backed up in slight defeat. The Clan started to break up from the crowd, before the WindClan leader's voice rasped again. "But that is not all I have wanted to announce," Vinestar broadcasted.

Frostpaw had started to be relieved, until the leader's voice again, when she sucked in a nervous gulp of air. *What else could he want to say? Please, StarClan, don't let him take my mentor away!* "I had lied to protect my Clan," he continued. Meows of confusion rang around the crowd. Willowheart and Tigertail even seemed a bit shocked. What did he lie about?

"The dogs from the moor, yes, they took a life from me," Vinestar huffed. "My third from last. But during the battle, the rest of the patrol was occupied. As I was clashing with one of the dogs, it had taken another life. None of you knew, but-" he broke off in a spree of coughs. "As I am growing weaker, I think it is time you know." Gasps of shock echoed from the crowd.

Spottedpelt seemed to go frozen. Frostpaw didn't know what to feel. Vinestar was quite unreasonable, but, did she really want him to die? *Of course not! What are you thinking?* "Tigertail, Amberstripe, Cinnamontail, and Lionrage shall take shifts to be my guards," Vinestar went on.

I-is that right? Frostpaw felt slightly confused. The guards ambled towards the rock with blank expressions, bowing their heads slightly to him. Tansybranch's tail lashed to and fro next to her. Of course, WindClan's leader chose none of Spottedpelt's supporters. And Tigertail stood, slightly satisfied. Did he feel above the rest of the Clan now?

Frostpaw held her breath. Did Vinestar had more to say? She guessed not, because the crowd started to dissipate, and Vinestar didn't put a halt to it. He eventually struggled down the stone, his guards following with a quick pace.

Frostpaw gazed up at her mentor, relief splashing onto her. "Thank StarClan," she sighed. "I wouldn't want another mentor."

Spottedpelt nodded, her worried focus still placed on the sandy clearing. "I-I know," she stuttered, gulping. She signaled Frostpaw to follow her with her tail. The white she-cat trotted towards the freckled shape, settling down in a cleft beside the warriors' den.

"Frostpaw, w-what will the Clan think if I become leader?" Spottedpelt stammered, slightly shaking.

Frostpaw seemed to be taken aback by her statement. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Half of the Clan thinks I'm a criminal," Spottedpelt fretted. "And I'm the deputy!"

"I'm sure you'll have plenty who will support you," Frostpaw comforted, resting her tail on the she-cat's shoulder. "I'm sure of it."

Spottedpelt stifled a sigh and meowed, "Y-yeah, you're p-probably right."

Frostpaw gave the she-cat a nod, shuffling over to the fresh-kill pile. She picked out a sparrow, making her way back to the cleft. She dropped the prey in front of her mentor. "Here," she mewed.

Spottedpelt examined the prey for a few heartbeats. "Thanks," she responded, digging into the fresh-kill. Frostpaw shared it with her, her mind still obscuring other thoughts with anxiety.

// Chapter Twenty Seven

"I shall not risk attending tonight's Gathering," Vinestar addressed to his cluster of warriors. Spottedpelt felt a flare of shock go through her at the tabby's words. The assigned WindClanners whisked away and started towards the barrier: Brokenpaw, Amberstripe, Embergaze, Molefang, Littlefoot, Lionrage, and Buzzardsong.

Spottedpelt had ventured back to her nest inside of the warriors' den, her mind racing as she contemplated every problematic situation. Could ShadowClan find WindClan weak as their leader nor deputy attended the Gathering and make a time for an attack of vengeance? She remembered the rage and sorrow that glowed in the ShadowClan cats' eyes.

But maybe it wasn't that bad she wasn't there. Maybe she was a terrible deputy. She was still left confused. She lifted her gaze to the stars. She prayed to StarClan for guidance. Maybe she should just retire to an elder. That way, her Clan could have a better leader. But wouldn't she be seen as dishonorable? She was still quite young, and had a long time to serve her Clan.

As she received no answer from the stars, she lowered her head, a slight headache coming upon her. She had barely received any sleep for two days. And as she tried, her mind just seemed to race faster and faster. Eventually, she seemed so exhausted that she started to doze off.

Something sharp awoke her; like a paw in the ribs. She was jolted out of her sleep, her ears ringing as she heard the roar of thunder split the air nearby. She quickly arranged onto her paws. She could hear the hiss and patter of raindrops on the stone roof, partnered by large bolts of lightning.

The sky was shadowed with dark clouds that crackled with thunder. Somehow, the moon still hung in the sky, surrounded by a nest of dark grey patches. As Spottedpelt had just emerged from the warriors' den, her pelt was already drenched. The sand below her

was soggy and stuck together, scrunching underpaw.

She scrutinized the clearing, searching for her fellow warriors as the storm intensified. Wind pelted her coat, followed by the herds of rain and hail that nibbled at her skin. Grasspaw, Rockpaw, and Frostpaw scuttled towards her, their eyes squinted to protect them from the violent storm. Spottedpelt yowled out to them, pointing her tail towards the warriors' den.

The three apprentices made their way towards her, Grasspaw shrieking and her fur sticking out as lightning struck at what looked like only dozens of fox-lengths away. Finally, the three shapes arrived beside Spottedpelt in a panicking huddle, darting into the protection of the warriors' den.

Tigertail followed, too distracted to even shoot a suspicious glance to Spottedpelt. Cinnamontail and Darkpool shuffled behind him, their hearts pounding and their green and copper eyes wide. Webshine, Tallear, and Tansybranch traveled slowly to join them, Tallear leaning on Webshine's shoulder.

As they grew closer, Spottedpelt quickly breathed, "What happened?"

It took a few heartbeats for them to answer. Spottedpelt could see Webshine's mouth slightly moving, but it was blocked out by another boom of thunder. They hastily trekked on, collapsing into the den and huffing out in relief. Tallear clenched his teeth in pain as Webshine went to lay on some moss. Her belly had started to enlarge. She would join the nursery soon.

"He scraped his leg on one of the boulders at the entrance," Tansybranch answered. "He and I were on patrol, and when the storm started, we had a hard time coming back. It was hard to see."

"Do you need me to fetch Willowheart?" Spottedpelt anxiously mewed to the black and brown tom. Tallear shook his head.

"No," he responded quickly. "She's safe in her den. The storm's getting worse, we m-musn't go back out until it's gone."

Spottedpelt nodded. Gingertail, Cloverpatch, and Copperfrost started to stir, their heads lifting as the night grew louder with thunder. Spottedpelt stuck her head out of the den, immediately being stung by the needle-like downpour. She spotted Fiercetalon guiding Beavertail with an ear flick, a frail Twoclaw limping beside him.

"Come on!" Spottedpelt screeched. "Hurry!" The storm grew stronger, buffeting the three approaching cats' fur. The ear-splitting sound waves of thunder arrived, flashing behind the coming figures.

Large hail started to rain down, causing Fiercetalon to grab Beavertail by the scruff and drag him towards the entrance. Twoclaw loomed behind, taking weak steps towards the den. Spottedpelt readied her haunches for a leap, emerging out into the rainfall. She instinctively fastened her teeth into Twoclaw's scruff, hauling the aged tom towards the others.

She plodded under the overhang, setting Twoclaw with the others. Fiercetalon and Beavertail had arrived first, breathing heavily. The group of felines went deeper into the warriors' den, Spottedpelt watching protectively. Her focus was fixed on her Clanmates. She remembered the cats at the Gathering. Would they be alright? Would they come back? She checked for the full moon, which still was placed in the sky.

Suddenly, her heart lurched. "Sorrelpath!" she howled. "Where's Sorrelpath?"

The cluster exchanged unknowing glimpses. "I-I think she was hunting outside the camp," Webshine explained. "Tallear and Tansybranch, did you come across her?"

Tallear and Tansybranch shook their heads. "I have to find her!" Spottedpelt gasped, craning her head to search around.

"I'm sure she's fine," Copperfrost comforted, trying to keep her voice at a hopeful pitch.

"No!" Spottedpelt argued. "I must find her!"

"I'll come with you," Frostpaw volunteered. The breath suddenly stopped with fear. She couldn't put her apprentice into danger.

"No!" Spottedpelt shouted firmly. "I will not put you in danger!" She licked the top of Frostpaw's head. "We'll both be fine," she meowed. "Stay with your siblings and mother. Find them a good place to rest."

Frostpaw separated her jaws to protest, before closing them and nodding in reluctant agreement. She dashed off, the WindClan deputy making her way towards the entrance. Spottedpelt dipped under it, almost slipping in the deluge of rain. Thunder snapped through the air again, more streaks of lightning zapping through the sky.

"Sorrelpath!" Spottedpelt yelped, her voice being muffled out by the noise. "Where are you?"

She galloped through the camp as hail came down stronger followed by the cry of wind. She screeched out again, repeatedly becoming incoherent. Every sound seemed to be blocked out as the thunder emerged victorious over all other audio.

Spottedpelt barged out of the entrance, her gaze darting every possible direction. A faint figure stood in the middle of the horizon, their muzzle facing the moon.

It was Sorrelpath. Spottedpelt bounded towards her, all the pain from the hail and downpour seeming to disappear and be replaced by the aching worry for her sister. She could spot her sister's desperate green eyes filled with tears.

"SORRELPATH!" Spottedpelt yowled as lightning seized the atmosphere only dozens of fox-lengths away. "COME ON!"

Sorrelpath seemed sorrowful, her paws not wanting to take her any place else. Spottedpelt gulped as she came closer to the tortoiseshell.

"Spottedpelt," Sorrelpath meowed, her voice seeming clear. "What if Eaglekit's out in this weather?"

Spottedpelt froze and stuttered, "I-I'm sure if he's safe. He's probably with the Twolegs. O-or maybe ShadowClan *did* take him, but they're probably taking really good care of him-"

Sorrelpath cut her off. "He's probably dead," she hissed grimly. "StarClan must be punishing us for being the daughters of Jayheart and Amberstripe. Maybe Vinestar has been right all this time." Spottedpelt felt like a thorn had punctured her heart. Could it be true? She looked up at the moon, which still seemed clear.

It was so unusual. It looked like it had more craters than usual. They looked like.. Spots.

Thunder blasted again, hurling Spottedpelt out of her daze. "Come on!" she ordered desperately. Sorrelpath contorted her head to the side as the she-cat went off. Spottedpelt urgently flicked her ear. Soon, Sorrelpath was following, darting towards her. She grew closer into sight, and soon, picked up the same pace Spottedpelt had.

They slithered into camp. Their paws aching, they finally made it into the warriors' den through the pouring downfall. Sorrelpath fell into the moss, breathing heavily. "Spottedpelt.." she squeaked.

Spottedpelt met gazes with her sister. "I-I'm so sorry for how I have acted," Sorrelpath stammered. Spottedpelt felt great empathy for her.

"No," she mewed softly. "It's not your fault." She stepped away from her sister, leaving her to rest. She peeked out of the den, where she saw wet sand travelling towards the medicine den. She had not heard from Willowheart or Vinestar at all. Maybe her paws felt like they were about to fall off, but she needed to make sure they were alright. Worry sunk at the bottom of her stomach as she remembered the Gathering cats. Yes, they have treated her badly before, but they're her Clanmates.

She prowled towards the den. She prayed to StarClan for the best. What if all of Willowheart's herbs were destroyed by the flood? She couldn't imagine how hard it would be without remedies. And what about Vinestar? Was he alright?

Rain thumped all over, hail pounding over the she-cat. She just wanted to sleep and leave the storm behind. But she couldn't leave anyone in the dust. Thunder rumbled yet again. "Willowheart!" she called.

The wind seemed to grow stronger. Would it ever end? The lithe WindClan deputy strained on through the sand. "Willowhea-" she repeated, being cut off by shock as lightning struck right behind the medicine den. Willowheart's silhouette flashed as the bolt struck the ground. Her muzzle was wrinkled up in bitterness, a weakened figure laying in front of her paws. As Spottedpelt approached the den, her heart stopped. She couldn't fathom it. She was incredulous. She couldn't accept it.

Vinestar was sprawled out in front of her, his limbs starting to become limp like birds falling dead from a tree. His flanks heaved and his jaws parted in a hoarse gasp for breath. Deathberry juice leaked from his lips as he coughed the drops up.

Vinestar weakly turned his head towards Spottedpelt. "This was your plan, wasn't it?" he wheezed, his head falling limp on the hard stone ground in the medicine den after a final attempt of gulping air.

"YOU KILLED HIM!" Spottedpelt screeched at the top of her lungs. Her claws unsheathed as she angrily approached the medicine cat.

"He was destroying this Clan!" Willowheart spat defensively, backing up deeper into the cavern. Spottedpelt froze.

"But you killed him!" Spottedpelt gasped. "He never did anything to deserve that!"

"You don't know half the things he did to this Clan," Willowheart rasped. *What?*

Spottedpelt strolled forward, her teeth baring and her heels dragging across the floor. Her claws scraped the stone. "Tell me," she sneered. "Tell me why you should be able to kill our own leader in the depths of our camp in all places!"

Willowheart chuckled. "You won't believe me, will you?" she asked.

"Get to the point," Spottedpelt snarled.

"Vinestar would've lead us to war with ShadowClan. He killed an innocent warrior and an apprentice. He probably already has caused a war. I've seen so many dreams over blood and claws, and every time, there was the WindClan camp. Vines had been growing on every den. They tangled around our Clanmates, strangling them. And that's just the start," Willowheart growled.

Spottedpelt's fur bristled. StarClan even thought Vinestar should've died. And yes, the ShadowClan battle was a terrible decision, but there were losses from both sides. She rested her defensive position slightly, ordering, "Go on."

"There was a battle in ThunderClan with rogues. Vinestar spotted a ginger tabby rogue racing off with a stolen kit. He confronted them, keeping the brown tom-kit hostage. He told the rogue that if they could assassinate Goldenheart from ShadowClan that the rogue would be able to keep the kit and he would give her refuge in WindClan. The rogue refused. Vinestar slaughtered the poor kit. He leaped at the rogue, which tore one of his lives away from him. He lied about losing a life to the dogs," Willowheart continued, her voice shaking.

Spottedpelt felt horror snap through her. He killed a kit? "And not only that," Willowheart meowed. "He destroyed the catmint and framed you. He caused the deaths of Shrimpkit and Eelkit. StarClan knew the Clan needed to be punished for the deaths that Vinestar caused. And the punishment was Shrimpkit and Eelkit's greencough."

"What?" Spottecdpelt gasped. "How do you know?" She lowered her head and wrinkled her muzzle provokingly. She didn't want to believe the medicine cat's words.

"Brokenpaw saw him," the medicine cat responded. "She's seen many things he's done. Come on, follow me. I must show you something." *Wait.. I'll be Spotted*star? *No, StarClan, no! I-I can't be..* Willowheart and a disbelieving Spottedpelt slunk through the

storm, Spottedpelt's mind aching more than her paws.

Willowheart emerged into Vinestar's den, Spottedpelt reluctantly coming behind. The silver tabby she-cat trotted forward, uncovering red berries under a sheet of moss. "He took some of mine," Willowheart sneered. "In case he needed them. Do you know what he could've done?"

Spottedpelt stared angrily into the she-cat's optics. "But.. I am becoming leader!" she hissed. "You made me leader! I am not fit to lead this Clan!" She shouted in fear, "You mangy rat! What have you done?"

"You are the cat most fit to be leader of WindClan," Willowheart addressed the she-cat. "So exile me, kill me if you must, but I know I have done the right thing for this Clan and all others."

Spottedpelt was stiff to the ground, every phrase crumbling up before it could come out of her jaws. *Leader, leader, leader..* the words repeated themselves. Her claws unsheathed into the ground. The patter of rain started to come to a halt, and cats were shuffling towards the entrance of the leader's den. Every cats' eyes were widened.

"What happened?" Amberstripe demanded, her gaze clouded with bitterness towards Spottedpelt and anxiety for the situation hanging in the air.

The spotted moon still hung in the sky. "StarClan has sent this moon as an omen," Willowheart announced. "Spottedpelt shall be WindClan's next leader."

// Epilogue

A beige figure with large, pointy ears and a broad chest studied the ripples that traveled through the puddle as drops fell down from the willows above. It was astonishingly beautiful; if only the figure didn't look so pitiful and filled to the brim with grief.

He shook his head as a droplet landed on his nose, flinging it off. He sighed, his breath trembling with fear and sorrow. The pool's water undulated and reflected his worn-out look. His torn up face gleamed with scars and blemishes, and as he gazed deeper, tears started to well up on his eyelids. He cocked his head to look away as the memories started to gush through his mind.

A sleek, blue-grey figure slid out from in between the thickets. He shook out his pelt of leaves and brambles, noticing the anxious tan shape that loitered beside the pond. He padded over, concern and confusion in his gaze. He blinked and gave a small smile; a look of recalling old friends and family.

"They banished you, too?" the beige tom rasped. He stared anxiously into the other tom's optics. He quivered with fear as he realized how faint the old leader appeared. His presence was vague, and with a quick enough glance, he could go unnoticed to the regular eye.

The blue-grey tom responded in a slight nod. "They were brutal," the blue-grey tom gasped. "I never thought they could become that fox-hearted."

"I wish I could've saved them," the other tom hissed. "But I died too early. I left Lightgaze to fend on his own. He has grown up well, but, he couldn't save us.. because of me. If I had just been there to defend my Clan!"

The blue-grey tom watched helplessly as regretful words spewed from the other tom's jaws. A growl started to build up inside him. "This isn't your fault!" he exclaimed. "It's the other Clans' doing. It's

StarClan's fault. They were the ones who drove us out."

"How could they become like this?" the beige tom huffed, his tail twitching. "How could they exile us, Waterstar? We didn't even do anything to harm their precious legacy."

Waterstar shook his head, trying to clear the unwanted flashbacks. "Because they are trying to hide their unruly actions from the future generations," he reasoned in a disgusted tone. "And they didn't give us a single chance because they didn't trust we'd keep the secret. It is absolutely unjust." The beige tom met desperate gazes with the older tom.

"What can we do?" the tan tom asked.

"Do you seek a change, Birchstar?" Waterstar responded wisely. His expression was thoughtful, and his gaze was pointed towards Birchstar. Birchstar sat wordlessly for a moment.

"Maybe it would be demanding too much," Birchstar puffed. He pointed his tail around the forest. "There isn't anything we *can* do. This place isn't that bad anyway, is it? It looks just like the old territory."

"Yes," Waterstar presumed. "It does. Maybe it isn't a punishment to be here. StarClan doesn't even know about this." He lifted his paw as he spoke, panning out the paradise amplified before him. But his eyes still were wistful, hoping for something more; longing to see his friends and family.

"But it still feels... *weird*," Birchstar continued. He couldn't find the words to describe it. Waterstar blinked at him.

"I feel the same," Waterstar meowed. He looked over at the pond, signalling Birchstar forward with his tail. "I mean, look what they did to us.." They were covered in many wounds that were chiseled over their body. "Wouldn't they of sent us to some place worse if they cared so little? Or did they not know of this place?"

"All of this turmoil just to protect their legacy," Birchstar remarked, shaking his head. "StarClan claims they didn't want this. They claim

they weren't a part of this, but it's all false. Most of them just want to protect their legacy, when they were as apathetic as the Clans when they drove us out."

"But not all of them," Waterstar added. "I knew many cats that were true. I watched Nettlestar take in many of our cats. She knew what we had been through."

"RiverClan was pretty generous," Birchstar mewed. "They gave mercy to the elders and kits they could from SkyClan. But they still have been banned from the truth. It's hard to say what the territories are becoming. I've heard of great tales from all five Clans being binded together."

"Those prior times are a great blur," Waterstar opinionated. "The legends of the past have almost completely stopped from being told. I'll bet the ones who drove us out didn't even know about them. I didn't even know about those old tales until my medicine cat told me. But StarClan seems to be stop even passing down the stories to the medicine cats."

"But.. maybe they do have plans," Birchstar stated. "I-I guess we have to stay here to become forgotten and hope for the best."

Waterstar nodded. The two leaders sat in silence, grimly comprehending the reality of their presence. A wave of mist hovered above them, and everywhere in the distance seemed hard to perceive. Birchstar's mind was racing, while Waterstar seemed quite calm, closing his eyes and taking long breaths to try and settle his thoughts. For a heartbeat his body vanished as it was blocked by heavy mist.

Birchstar didn't know how much time his successor had left. But Waterstar didn't panic. He stayed wise and tranquil through even the hardest times. Birchstar honored the old leader, even if while he was living all he heard about him were old elders' tales.

A voice jolted them from their lonely thoughts. "I've heard you don't want to be forgotten," it rasped. Birchstar whisked around, where he discovered a muscular and scarred faded she-cat standing behind the mist. She was too hard to see behind the sheets of fog, but her

voice was clear. No answer came from either Birchstar or Waterstar.

"I can let you achieve that goal," the she-cat continued. "And the Clans won't just remember you; they'll fear you."